

Russellians should have a no proposition view of empty names*

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26 May 2022

Abstract

Empty names are a problem for Russellians. I describe three ways to approach solving the problem. These are positing gappy propositions as contents, nonsingular propositions as contents, or denying that sentences containing empty names have contents. I discuss methods for deciding between solutions. I then argue for some methods over others, and defend one solution using those methods. I reject the arguments that either intuitions about truth value, truth, content, or meaningfulness can decide between the solutions. I give an alternative argument which does decide between the three solutions. The alternative is based on the idea that a sentence and its internal negation are contrary: they cannot both be true, but they might both be false. I argue from Russellian premises to the conclusion that such sentences cannot be assigned truth values when they contain empty names. The argument shows that no Russellian should assign a truth value to a sentence containing an empty name, and therefore that no Russellian should assign a proposition as the content of such a sentence. This shows that Russellians should conclude that sentences containing empty names do not have contents, i.e., the no proposition view.

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*I thank Paolo Acquaviva, Pål Antonsen, Jonathan Berg, Corine Besson, Niall Connolly, Anthony Everett, Zuzanna Gnatek, James Levine, Matthew McKeever, James Miller, and Elmar Geir Unnsteinsson, and the audience at the Dublin Philosophy Research Network Empty Names workshop. This research was supported by an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellowship.

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The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in Inquiry 26 May 2022 <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0020174X.2022.2075916>.

1 Introduction

Empty names are notoriously a problem for Russellians; I will explain exactly what I mean by ‘Russellian’ in section 2. Various views have been defended as solutions. I will describe the problem in section 2. I present three solutions in section 3. These are the view that sentences containing empty names have gappy propositions as contents, that they have nonsingular propositions as contents, and that such sentences lack contents entirely. This third option has not been popular, but it is my favourite solution.

In section 4, I will discuss some arguments that have been used to try to decide between solutions and show that they either fail to decide between some of the options, or simply fail, or both. In section 5, I will present a better argument which is successful in deciding between the options. I will argue that there are good reasons to deny that sentences containing empty names have truth values, and therefore that they have propositions as contents. The conclusion of this argument is that Russellians should take the view the sentences containing empty names do not have contents, i.e., what I call the no proposition view.

The argument I will present in section 5 is based on negation, specifically, *internal* negations where a predicate is negated and combined with a name; I introduce examples in subsection 4.1. The important feature of internal negation is that a sentence and its internal negation cannot both be true, but might both be false; they are *contrary*, but not *contradictory*, i.e., it is not the case that if one is true then the other is false. I will argue that if one pays attention to

such examples, it becomes clear that no Russellian should assign truth values to sentences containing empty names. In particular, there is an argument from Russellian premises to the conclusion internal negations containing empty names cannot be either true or false. No Russellian view can assign either of these truth values to these sentences while preserving the idea that such sentences are contrary, not contradictory.

This paper has two points. The first is the methodological point about how to decide between proposed solutions, and the second is that once these considerations have been taken account of there are reasons to favour the view that sentences containing empty names do not have contents. My goal is to work out the best version of Russellianism. So, I will accept for the purpose of this paper that Russellianism is true in order to work out what follows and how to best develop the view.

2 A Russellian problem

The view that I will call *Russellianism* is a view about the nature of content, truth, and the contribution to content made by names. The core ideas are the following:

- The contents of sentences are *structured propositions*: complexes of objects and properties which are truth evaluable.
- Structured propositions are the primary bearers of truth; sentences get their truth values from the structured propositions that are their contents.
- The contribution made by a name to the content of a sentence containing that name is that name's referent.

Russell at one time defended a view like this, although he had a particular and restrictive view about names (Russell 1903, 1905, 1911). Many contemporary philosophers of language defend Russellianism (Salmon 1986; Soames 2002; Stevens 2005; King 2007; 2019, sec. 3.1; Cumming 2019, sec. 2.1).

Russellianism, therefore, both rejects views which try to avoid commitment to entities which are the contents of sentences, and also views which take these entities to be, e.g., sets of worlds, properties, or complexes of senses. Russellianism also rejects the view that the properties of objects are part of the contribution made by names of those objects to content, i.e., 'Aristotle' contributes a person, not the property of being the teacher of Alexander the Great. So, Russellianism is one of the views which takes seriously the arguments in Kripke (1980). Russell himself took the view that this applied only to 'logically proper names', and that most names were in fact disguised definite descriptions (Russell 1905, 1911). This is one way in which Russellians depart from Russell (see Donnellan (1990) and Jeshion (2014) for discussion). Most contemporary Russellians take it that most things that we ordinarily call names are names, and therefore contribute referents to contents.¹

¹This view might be called 'Millianism', following, e.g., Braun (2005) and referring to John Stuart Mill's view of names. And, given Russell's actual view, perhaps the view should be called 'neo-Russellian', 'Russellianism–Millianism', or even 'neo-Russellianism–Millianism'. All of these options seem unnecessarily complicated to me, and 'Russellianism' suggests that the

What I have described is not a complete theory of content, but it is part of the common core of a range of influential views. Any view with this common core will have to say something about the problem of empty names, because empty names seem to make the common core untenable. This, along with the problem of the unity of the proposition, is a standard objection to Russellianism.²

Here is a simple way to set up the problem. We can identify a class of expressions, of whatever natural language we are interested in, as names. Perhaps not all of these names refer to objects; those that do not are *empty*. Standard examples are ‘Sherlock Holmes’ and ‘Vulcan’. Various sorts of empty name are distinguished in the literature (Salmon 1998). Any differences between the types from which my examples come are irrelevant to the arguments of this paper. Other examples might be names of individuals who did exist but no longer do, or which will exist but do not now (Markosian 2004).

One complication is that various philosophers, either as part of a strategy for defending Russellianism or independently, will claim that some or other class of *prima facie* empty name is not in fact empty. For example, a fictional realist will claim that ‘Sherlock Holmes’ refers to a fictional character (van Inwagen 1977; Friend 2007; Kripke 2013). Or, a Meinongian might claim that ‘Vulcan’ refers to a non-existent object (Meinong 1960; Priest 2005). This immediately solves the problem for the Russellian by reducing the number of empty names. However, it does not help the Russellian to decide what they ought to say about names that really are empty. So, I will use these standard examples; my discussion can be extended to any others. A parallel point applies to those, like Russell (1905); Russell (1911), who claim that some things that we think of as names are not really names, because they are, e.g., abbreviated descriptions.

Now compare (1) and (2).

- (1) Neptune is a planet.
- (2) Vulcan is a planet.

The core Russellian theory has no problems with (1). The referent of ‘Neptune’ is Neptune, and the content of (1) can be a structured proposition represented as $\langle \text{Neptune}, \text{planet} \rangle$. Propositions like this, containing objects like Neptune, are called *singular propositions*; for Russellians, being singular is a matter of having objects as constituents (Fitch and Nelson 2016, sec. 1).

If ‘Vulcan’ doesn’t have a referent then (2) cannot have a proposition with the referent of ‘Vulcan’ as a constituent. So, generalising, if there are empty names then some sentences either do not have contents, or have contents that do not follow from the core Russellian view. And, in that latter case, the relationship between being a name, having a referent, and the particular contribution an expression makes to the content of a sentence of which it is a part must be complicated.

My goal is to defend Russellianism by giving an account of the ways in which I think that the theory should be complicated. I will take some steps in that

focus is on the nature of propositions, which is where I want it to be.

²See Gaskin (2008); King (2007); Collins (2011); King, Soames, and Speaks (2014); Hanks (2015); Soames (2015) for discussion of the problem of the unity of the proposition.

direction in this paper by discussing how we might decide between competing amendments to the theory, and arguing for one in particular. Of course the project of defending Russellianism, even against the single objection discussed above, is beyond the scope of one paper. Here I attempt only a small part.

Someone might respond that all the amendments discussed are in fact rejections of Russellianism and should be presented as such. My view is that all the amendments preserve enough of the basic ideas of Russellianism for it to be reasonable to call them Russellian theories.

3 Three solutions

3.1 Gappy proposition

One response to the problem of empty names is to posit propositions with ‘gaps’ where objects would be and assign these as the contents of sentences like (2). These might be represented as, e.g. $\langle _ , \text{planet} \rangle$ in the case of (2). This view is defended by Braun (1993); Braun (2005); Salmon (1998); Braun and Salmon cite a footnote in Kaplan (1989, 496) as an early version of the view.³ For discussion of the gappy proposition view see Taylor (2000); Everett (2003); Mousavian (2011).

The gappy proposition view comes in two varieties. Braun’s version of the view, *GPF*, takes it that atomic gappy propositions are false; it preserves bivalence for propositions. Salmon’s version of the view, *GPI*, takes atomic gappy propositions to be neither true nor false. Braun and Salmon argue for their respective versions in the papers cited above. I will consider both versions.

This response to the problem of empty names amends the core Russellian view by allowing that some names do not have contents, and allowing that some names do not contribute their contents to the contents of sentences in which they appear. The view also admits a distinct new sort of proposition into the Russellian theory of the metaphysics of content. This is a significant amendment which can be justified only if there is enough to gain from it.

3.2 Nonsingular proposition

Another response is to say that sentences like (2) do have structured propositions as contents, but these are not singular propositions. Various ideas could be developed about which propositions these are.

For the purpose of exposition I will briefly present one version of the view, defended in Hodgson (2018b); other versions of the view could be given, but

³Braun (1993) uses the term ‘unfilled proposition’; Braun (2005) switches to ‘gappy proposition’. Salmon (1998) uses the term ‘structurally challenged proposition’. Braun (1993, 468, endnote 23) mentions an unpublished manuscript by Kaplan. Almog (1991, 618, endnote 15) refers to a manuscript by Kaplan as ‘a 1973 unpublished lecture at the Connecticut conference on translation’ in response to a lecture by Kripke, which may well be the same manuscript. I believe that the conference is the one that is the subject of *Synthese* (Volume 27, Issue 3–4, JULY/AUGUST 1974, <https://link.springer.com/journal/11229/27/3/>), and that Kripke’s lecture is the one eventually published as Kripke (2011).

the differences are not relevant to my argument. This view takes the proposition assigned as the content of (2) to be a proposition involving the property of being a referent of the name ‘Vulcan’. This can be represented as $\langle \lambda x. \langle \langle x, \text{referent of ‘Vulcan’} \rangle, \langle x, \text{planet} \rangle, \text{CONJ} \rangle, \text{SOME} \rangle$. This notation uses lambda expressions to denote propositional functions, in this case a function from objects to propositions; SOME is a property of propositional functions satisfied by those which take something to a true proposition. Russellians already need propositional functions and properties of such functions (Pickel 2019). The proposition assigned to (2) might be described as the proposition that there is something such that it is both a referent of ‘Vulcan’ and a planet. This is false if ‘Vulcan’ does not have a referent. It would be true if ‘Vulcan’ had a referent that was a planet, and would be entailed by the proposition that the Russellian would assign to (2) in that case.

This view can be usefully compared to metalinguistic descriptivism, but it is not identical to it. In particular, names are not functioning as descriptions in any syntactic sense, nor are descriptions part of how reference is fixed.

This view amends the core Russellian view by complicating the relationship between names and the contents of sentences in which they occur. Some sentences express nonsingular propositions, and some express singular propositions.

3.3 No proposition

Another response is simply to accept that sentences like (2), i.e., sentences containing empty names, do not have propositional contents. This view amends the core Russellian view by accepting that not all well-formed sentences have propositional contents. This can be contrasted with the view that all well-formed sentences have propositional contents, but some contents are gappy, and the view that all well-formed sentences have propositional contents but some contents are, surprisingly, nonsingular. I will argue that the no proposition view is the best view for the Russellian who accepts that there are empty names.

The no proposition view has not been popular. Donnellan (1974) defends a version of it, and Salmon (1998, endnote 19) attributes a version of it to Kripke. Most Russellians have attempted to defend either the gappy proposition view or the nonsingular proposition view, or have adopted views according to which many seemingly empty names refer to fictional or mythical objects.

The no proposition view has an important consequence. Because, according to Russellians, propositions are the primary bearers of truth, sentences which do not have propositional contents are not true, and nor are they false or any other value. Such sentences simply lack truth values because they lack contents. I say more about the Russellian view of truth in subsection 4.1.

4 How not to decide

4.1 Truth value

Here are some examples of sentences containing empty names; I will use ‘Vulcan’ and ‘Sherlock Holmes’ as arbitrary examples of empty names. I will refer to my

examples, including (2), collectively as the *example set*. The first sort of example are simple sentences containing the names; (2) is also an example of this sort.

- (3) Sherlock Holmes is a detective.
- (4) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character.
- (5) Vulcan is a mythical object.

The second class of examples are *existentials*, *positive*, e.g., (6), and *negative*, e.g., (7).

- (6) Sherlock Holmes exists.
- (7) Sherlock Holmes does not exist.

Existentials raise many difficult issues which I will not try to resolve. I will accept for the purposes of this paper, following Braun (1993), that existence is a property, and that the negation that occurs in (7) is the sort that contributes a property of propositions that false ones have and true ones lack. Other views might be taken about both the meanings of ‘exist’ and ‘not’; many of them would in fact help the Russellian by eliminating the problem. Also, my argument for the no proposition view in section 5 does not involve negative existentials. So, it does not matter for my purposes whether the view I accept about them is correct.

The assumptions I accept about negative existentials are the worst case for Russellians because the problem with sentences like (7) is generated partly by the assumption that such sentences are saying of something that it does not exist, which leads to a contradiction (Crane 2013, 72).⁴ If ‘to exist’ is not a predicate that expresses a property this is not a problem. Relatedly, there is a problem with combining the view that a sentence of the form ‘*a* is not *F*’ predicates a property of the proposition expressed by the embedded sentence ‘*a* is *F*’ and the claim that a Russellian cannot assign any proposition to that embedded sentence. Other treatments of negation, including those discussed in Salmon (1998, 277–82), remove the first component of that problem, and, therefore, make the second part less problematic for the Russellian.

A third class of examples are also negations, but with a predicate other than ‘exist’. Examples include (8) and (9).

- (8) Neptune is not a planet.
- (9) Vulcan is not a planet.

These sentences will be important in the argument I will give in section 5 against some versions of the gappy proposition view, and against the nonsingular proposition view. One point to note about such sentences now is that there seem to be two distinct ways to read such sentences: either as *external* negations of an embedded sentence, or as *internal* negations of a predicate; I rely on some standard claims about negation, as described in Horn and Wansing (2020). The assumption I made above about the function of ‘not’ in (7) is that when the predicate is ‘exists’ the negation is always external. This avoids the standard problem that it is seemingly contradictory to assert of something that it does not

⁴Crane attributes this view to Moore (1953, 289).

exist, which is what the internal negation would be. However, internal negation is possible in other cases; the claim I accepted above is that existentials are a special case.⁵ The distinction between internal and external negation is a genuine ambiguity in sentences containing negations. So, (8) and (9) can be read in these two ways, corresponding to these two disambiguations. I take the view that this is the sort of ambiguity that is best thought of by treating the two readings as in effect corresponding to two distinct sentences which happen to look alike. I will make an argument based on what the Russellian must say about one of these two readings. For that reason, what they might say about the other possible reading will not be relevant.

Russellians have views about truth, and what it is for a sentence to be true or false. According to Russellians, propositions are the primary bearers of truth values; sentences have truth values if and only if they have propositions as contents. A sentence is true just in case its content is.⁶ This might be captured in the following way:

Truth A sentence is true if and only if the proposition that is its content is true.

Falsity A sentence is false if and only if the proposition that is its content is false.

A Russellian who thinks that some of the example set are true, or false, should therefore accept the nonsingular proposition view or GPF. This is because these views assign (false) propositions to sentences containing empty names. However, this consideration does not decide between these two views. It would count against both the no proposition view and GPI.

Furthermore, the argument is not decisive. It might be suggested that even a Russellian might resist the argument from the premise that the example set have truth values to the conclusion that they have nonsingular or gappy contents. One way to resist this conclusion would be to say that having propositional content is not a necessary condition for having a truth value. Donnellan (1974) and Almog (1991) both suggest this route.⁷ This would avoid the problem and would be a reason to favour the no proposition view. However, it departs from a significant Russellian commitment: the link between the truth of a sentence and that of a proposition that is its content. As the no proposition view does not require this departure, I will not endorse it.

A less radical response would be to accept that sentences containing empty names do not have truth values after all, as the no proposition view entails; this might be combined with the view that they can be used to express propositions

⁵One might want to deny that there should be special cases. The no proposition view does not entail that there are, whereas the gappy proposition view and nonsingular proposition view do. Braun's treatment of negation in negative existentials is presumably motivated by recognising that the gappy proposition view must treat negative existentials as a special case which preclude internal negation.

⁶I will talk as if sentences have at most one content. There are views committed to denying this (Bach 1999; Neale 1999). I will also ignore context sensitivity.

⁷Braun (1993, 450) describes a Russellian view without propositions as 'fundamentalism' and, page 466, endnote 5, attributes it to Wettstein (1988) and Almog (1991). The difference between Almog and Wettstein, and Donnellan is that the former reject propositions entirely while the latter proposes a no proposition view about sentences containing empty names; all three endorse the claim that some sentences have truth values without having propositional contents.

and that this confuses the judgements that we make about the sentences. In that case, the judgement about truth can be explained away while avoiding the conclusion that the sentences really have truth values, because an explanation can be given of why they seem to have truth values. Some version of this response should be made by the defender of the no proposition view.

In conclusion, at best, the argument from truth value is an argument that the Russellian should accept one of two of the three views introduced in section 3. The argument does not tell us which of these two views we should accept. At worst, the argument fails, because there are ways to defend the view that sentences appear to have truth values without assigning them propositional contents.

4.2 Truth

As well as holding that the example set must have truth values, it might also be claimed that they must have some particular truth value. For example, someone might think that any acceptable view must count (2) as false, but (3) as true. The no proposition view will be unacceptable to anybody who makes any such claim. The nonsingular proposition view will be unacceptable to anybody who regards any of the simple sentences from the example set to be true, because it predicts that they are all false. The same holds for the version of the gappy proposition view which takes all atomic gappy propositions to be false (GPF). The version of the gappy proposition view which takes all atomic gappy propositions to lack truth value (GPI) will make a different prediction which will also be unacceptable to someone with the view now being considered. GPI makes the same prediction as the no proposition view, i.e., that the sentences lack truth values.

Which prediction is made by the nonsingular proposition view and GPF view about (9) depends on whether the negation is internal or external. If the negation is external, both views take sentences like (9) to be true. This is because they are the negations of false propositions, and this will assign the sentences the same truth value as (7) where, according to, e.g., Braun, the negation must be taken as external. If the negation is internal, both views take (9) to be false. If the negation of an indeterminate proposition is true, then on the external reading of (9) it is true, according to GPI; an alternative view would take such negations to be indeterminate. On the internal reading (9) is indeterminate.

In section 5 I will defend the prediction of the no proposition view and GPI, and I will argue that the no proposition view is superior to GPI. This does not provide a defence against the argument that, for example, the prediction made by the nonsingular proposition view and GPF are data that must be respected by any theory.

This is a problem for the no proposition view, which I want to defend, to the extent that these intuitions are widespread. It is therefore relevant to assessing the no proposition view that at least part of the prediction is not a widespread intuition. My impression is that many of those who are committed to assigning specific truth values to sentences like (3), (4), (5) take them to be true, not false. And, it seems that the standard view about positive existentials such as (6) is that they are false and that corresponding negative existentials such as (7) are true. Negations of sentences such as (2) are taken to be false; and

no distinction is drawn between internal and external readings (Table 1). If these are the standard intuitions, the standard intuitions are not satisfied by any theory that is considered in this paper. Those who have the standard intuitions will therefore not have a reason to prefer any other view to the no proposition view.

I conclude from this that intuitions about truth value are not a good way to decide between solutions to the problem of empty names. The gappy proposition and nonsingular proposition views make the same predictions, which do not match the standard intuitions. A better way to decide will not appeal to judgements about truth value.

Table 1: Truth value predictions

Sentence	Nonsingular	GPF	Standard intuition
(2)	F	F	T
(3)	F	F	T
(4)	F	F	T
(5)	F	F	T
(6)	F	F	F
(7)	T	T	T
(9) (internal)	F	F	F
(9) (external)	T	T	F

4.3 Content

In the preceding sections, arguments were considered which took claims about truth value or truth as premises and made conclusions about content. What about arguing directly for content without premises about truth value or truth? The idea would be that a range of sentences, including the example set, must have propositional contents. The requirement is not supposed to be based on the requirement that they have some other property, like having a truth value or being true, but to be something that can be defended in its own right. This would support the gappy proposition view and the nonsingular proposition view.

Suppose the claim is granted. The core Russellian view will have to be amended. Both the gappy proposition and nonsingular proposition views can accommodate the claim about content, so this consideration will not help us to choose between them. However, this consideration would at least rule out the no proposition view. I will argue that we should not accept the premise on which the argument is based.

It is reasonable to ask for an argument in defence of the claim that the sentences in the example set from subsection 4.1 must have propositional contents. The most interesting sort of argument would be one where the premises are claims that Russellians tend to accept. In the remainder of this section I will consider, and reject, an argument for the claim about content. In subsection 4.4, I will consider a related argument based on an auxiliary premise about meaningfulness.

Take any sentence S from the example set, and any proposition P such that on some occasion S is used to convey P . The argument would proceed by claiming

that if S is used to convey P then either the speaker said P, or the speaker said some other proposition Q and thereby implicated P. In either case, there is some proposition, P or Q, which is said, and the things said when sentences are uttered are their contents. So, S has a content. This is a picture of linguistic communication strongly influenced by the work of Grice (1989).

The problem with this argument is that it relies on the premise that the only way to convey a proposition is to say some proposition or other, where what is said is identical to the content of the sentences uttered. This does seem to have been Grice's view, but is not the only view to be found in the contemporary literature on linguistic communication. For example, *relevance theorists* like Wilson, Sperber and Carston reject the view, as do more Gricean theorists like Bach (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Carston 2002, chap. 1; 2008; Bach 2001). Some philosophers do seem to endorse the claim but the details are often complicated (see Borg (2004), Borg (2012), Cappelen and Lepore (2005) and King and Stanley (2005) for discussion). A related issue is the debate about the possibility of expressing propositions with incomplete sentences (Stainton 2005). Everett (2003) discusses the application of Gricean pragmatics to the defence of gappy propositions. It is a difficult and controversial question whether content is required for communication. Without a compelling reason to think that content is required, this argument will not secure any results about how to decide between solutions to the problem of empty names. I have raised this argument because I think there is a version of it that does better, which I will discuss in the next section.

4.4 Meaningfulness

Here is the argument, which is specifically directed against the no proposition view. The sentences in the example set are meaningful. A sentence is meaningful if and only if it has a propositional content. So, these sentences have propositional contents. The first premise of this argument might be defended by appealing to the fact that ordinary speakers judge the sentences in question to be meaningful, or 'not nonsense'. This provides a reason to think that the sentences are meaningful in the sense that is relevant to the argument, which would otherwise be an obvious thing to deny.

Whether or not the first premise can be defended, the second premise can be denied. There is no good reason to think that a sentence is meaningful if and only if it has a propositional content. Of course, one might just identify the property of meaningfulness with having a content. This would beg the question, and invite the objection that that property cannot be what ordinary speakers are tracking. So, an argument is required that the property that speakers are tracking is one that requires the sentences that have it to have propositional content.

As far as I am aware, the only argument that has been offered is that propositional content is the only thing that could make speakers' judgements of meaningfulness veridical, because only sentences with propositional content can be truly regarded as 'not nonsense'. Versions of this argument are presented in Braun (1993); Braun (2005); Reimer (2001a). Both Braun and Reimer take the judgements of speakers to be a phenomenon that positing content is supposed to explain. Braun did

not regard the argument as conclusive in his earlier work, but does present it as such in the latter paper.

However, there are at least three alternative explanations of speakers' judgements about meaningfulness. If any of them succeed, then the argument from meaningfulness is blocked. The first is that what speakers are sensitive to is that the sentences in the example set can be used to convey something. This can be true of things that do not have propositional content, at least according to many linguists and philosophers of language, as discussed in subsection 4.3. A gesture can be used to convey a proposition, if the circumstances are right. So, speakers can be right about their judgement that sentences in the example set can be used to convey propositions without it following that the sentences have propositional content.

The second alternative explanation is that the sentences in the example set can be used as part of a pretence and thereby to convey something true about the real world. This is part of Everett's solution to the problem of empty names, drawing on work by Richard and Walton (Richard 2000; Walton 1990; Everett 2013). This can be true of things that do not have propositional content. So, speakers can be right about the claim that the sentences can be used in this way, and that this is a reasonable sense of 'meaningful', without propositional content being required.

The third alternative explanation is that speakers' judgements of meaningfulness are tracking the fact that the sentences in the example set are syntactically well-formed. This explanation is developed in Hodgson (2018a). The contrast would be with ill-formed strings or 'word salad'. This is a real property that the sentences in the example set really have. So, speakers' judgements can be considered veridical. I prefer the third alternative explanation. Any of the three would be sufficient for rejecting the second premise of the argument, and defending the no proposition view.

In conclusion, the argument from meaningfulness succeeds only if it is accepted that when ordinary speakers judge a sentence to be meaningful, or 'not nonsense', they are tracking the property of having a propositional content. Nobody thinks that speakers do so explicitly, but it is not incoherent to think that they do so tacitly. However, there are many other interesting properties that speakers might be tacitly tracking.

4.5 Interim conclusion

I have argued, in subsection 4.1 and subsection 4.2, that the claim that sentences containing empty names have truth values is not a good reason to favour one of the three Russellian solutions, because it does not distinguish between two of them. Nor is the claim that some such sentences are true. This is both because this does not decide between two of the solutions and because all the solutions that assign truth values to such sentences do not entail that all those that are standardly judged to be true are true.

None of the considerations raised in either subsection 4.1 or subsection 4.2 are inconsistent with the claim that speakers make judgements about the truth value, or truth aptness, of sentences, or that these judgements are reliable, or that

these judgements can be good evidence for some claims made by philosophers of language or linguists. I have argued for the limited point that such judgements are not decisive about the question of which view about sentence content a Russellian should adopt.

I then argued, in subsection 4.3 and subsection 4.4, that there is no good reason to think that sentences containing empty names must have propositional contents. It is at least plausible that sentences without propositional contents can be used to communicate and should be counted as meaningful. However, even if those sentences must have contents, this would not decide between the two solutions that do assign contents to these sentences, i.e., the gappy proposition view and the nonsingular proposition view.

In section 5 I will present an argument which does not have the defects of the four I have discussed. Firstly, I think that it is compelling, unlike the content and meaningfulness arguments. Secondly, it decides in favour of one of the three views: the no proposition view, unlike the truth value and truth arguments.

I will also address an important point left over from my discussion of the truth and truth value arguments. I have pointed out that they do not decide between two of the three solutions. However, they do seem to decide against one solution, the no proposition view, which is the one I defend. The argument I present in section 5 addresses this issue by giving a reason to reject any assignment of truth value to sentences containing empty names.

5 How to decide

5.1 The problem with truth

It is easy to see that a class of sentences containing empty names, including atomic sentences like (2), cannot be taken to be true by Russellians. This is because the claim I will call *Sentence truth* is hard to deny.⁸

Sentence truth A sentence of the form ‘*a* is *F*’ is true if and only if the referent of ‘*a*’ has the property denoted by ‘*F*’.

Sentence truth can be read in a way acceptable to those who think that there are empty names. The simplest way to do that is to treat the right-hand side as: there is a unique referent of ‘*a*’, and it has the property denoted by ‘*F*’. Someone who thinks that ‘*a*’ does not have a referent can take this to be false. Using some familiar notation, this can be presented as a formula of predicate logic. Let ‘ R_n ’ be the predicate ‘ ξ is a referent of n ’. The formula is $\exists x(R_ax \wedge \forall y(R_ay \rightarrow x = y) \wedge Fx)$. This can be simplified with the convention that ‘ $R_n!$ ’ denotes the predicate ‘ ξ is uniquely a referent of n ’: $\exists x(R_n!x \wedge Fx)$.

I assume here, and throughout, that the names I am discussing are ‘specific’, rather than ‘generic’, in the terms of Cumming (2019, sec. 1). In particular, each distinct name has at most one referent. I think that the arguments in this paper could be reformulated in terms of uses of names, which might mean that they

⁸The quote marks in Sentence truth and other claims I will formulate in the course of making this argument should be read as quasi-quotes (Cappelen, Lepore, and McKeever 2019, sec. 6.2).

could be adapted to a view according to which names are not specific. However, I will not try to work out those details.

Russellians, in particular, ought to accept Sentence truth. The core idea of Russellianism is that a sentence consisting of a name and a predicate expresses a proposition consisting of the referent of the name and the property denoted by the predicate; this proposition is true when the object has the property. Because Russellians accept Truth, they will hold that the sentence is true when the proposition expressed is, which is when the referent of the name has the property denoted by the predicate.

Sentence truth, and other similar claims that I will discuss below, are claims about what is entailed by certain sentences being true. I will move between claims like Sentence truth and claims about particular sentences. For example, I will move from Sentence truth, a claim about sentences of the form ‘ a is F ’ and the fact that (2) is of the form ‘ a is F ’ to the claim:

- Sentence (2) is true if and only if $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Vulcan}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x))$.

To see the problem, take the example of (2). As ‘Vulcan’ is empty, (2) cannot be true; otherwise, Sentence truth will entail that ‘Vulcan’ is not empty. This is because, if (2) is true, it follows from Sentence truth that $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Vulcan}}!x \wedge Fx)$. This entails that there is something which is a referent of ‘Vulcan’, which contradicts the claim that ‘Vulcan’ is an empty name. Russellians should therefore deny that (2) is true, and therefore, they should deny that (2) has a true proposition as its content. This is because Russellians accept Truth, which entails that if (2) has a true proposition as its content, (2) is true.

Those Russellians who want to assign propositions as contents of sentences like (2), those who hold the gappy proposition view or nonsingular proposition view, do not propose assigning true propositions to such sentences. The nonsingular proposition view and the variant of the gappy proposition view which says that atomic gappy propositions are false both assign false propositions as contents to, e.g., (2). So, proponents of these views can accept everything that I have said so far, and it seems likely to me that those philosophers who defend these views would agree with what I have said.

5.2 The problem with falsity

I will now develop a corresponding problem with falsity. A first thought would be to use an argument similar to the one against taking sentences like (2) to be true from subsection 5.1. This could be done with a claim like Sentence falsity:

Sentence falsity A sentence of the form ‘ a is F ’ is false if and only if the referent of ‘ a ’ does not have the property denoted by ‘ F ’.

However, the defender of either of the Russellian views under discussion could make the following reply: Sentence falsity should be accepted only if the right hand side is read so that the negation in it negates the whole claim. This would be equivalent to: $\neg\exists x(\mathbf{R}_a!x \wedge Fx)$. So, the important question for my argument is whether this reply can be made by a Russellian. I will argue that it cannot.

My strategy is to first show that this reply will not work for a class of sentences: those, e.g., (8) and (9), containing internal negations. Sentence falsity for these

sentences must be narrow. I will then argue that the way this response fails shows that it should not be made for sentences like (2) that do not contain negations. Sentence falsity for all sentences must be narrow. This is an important part of my argument that such sentences do not have contents, which is completed in subsection 5.4.

The argument for the stronger claim, applying to all sentences, relies on a premise about English. Sentences like (8), introduced in subsection 4.1, can be read in two ways. The first, external, way is the negation of an embedded clause. This can be stated as: it is not the case that Neptune is a planet. The second, internal, way is the negation of a predicate. This can be stated as: Neptune is not-a-planet. As I said in subsection 4.1, my preferred understanding of the ambiguity is to treat the two readings as two distinct sentences; in the course of making this argument, I will always be referring to the internal negation reading when I mention (8).

As an internal negation, (8) is contrary to (1), i.e., they cannot both be true. However, they are not contradictory: they might both be false. This is a general property of pairs consisting of internal negations and their non-negated counterparts. A standard example of such cases are sentences involving predicates such as those which Horn and Wansing (2020, sec. 1.4) call ‘immediate contraries’ such as ‘ ξ is odd’/‘ ξ is even’. No entity in the range of these predicates is such that it is neither odd nor even. But, some entities are not in the range of these predicates. The predicates ‘ ξ is a planet’/‘ ξ is not a planet’ are like this too; as are all predicates of the form ‘ ξ is F ’/‘ ξ is not- F ’. According to Horn and Wansing, Aristotle uses this sort of example as well as the example of an empty name. This is a property of sentences of a certain form, not the propositions they express. Sentences of the forms ‘ a is F ’ and ‘ a is not- F ’ are contraries, because some ways of filling in the variables result in two sentences which are both false. Sentences such as (1) and (8) are contrary in this sense.

The second premise of the argument for the stronger claim is a weaker claim about sentence falsity for internal negations. The weaker claim is that, if a sentence like (8) is an internal negation, the right hand side of both Sentence truth and Sentence falsity must in that case be read in the narrow scope way. I will now argue for that weaker claim.

Firstly, I note that there are two options for the truth of the internal reading of (8).⁹

- Sentence (8) is true if and only if $\neg\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x))$. (wide)
- Sentence (8) is true if and only if $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \neg\text{Planet}(x))$. (narrow)

Russellians ought to accept the narrow option for the truth of internal negations, for the following reason. Internal negations are used to deny that a referred to object has a property. In the case of (8), Russellians will treat the sentence as having as its content the proposition $\langle \text{Neptune, not-a-planet} \rangle$. This is because, according to the Russellian, the content of such a sentence is composed of the

⁹I have chosen to represent the difference between negating a whole sentence and negating a predication using different scopes of a negation operator on the right hand side. This is not a suggestion about the syntax of English. Another option would be to define the *complement* of a predicate, F , with extension A , as a predicate \bar{F} with the extension $\{x : x \notin A\}$.

object referred to by the name and the property denoted by the predicate. This proposition, like all such atomic propositions, is true when the object has the property. So, if the sentence is true, then there is an object, the constituent of the proposition, which has the property. The argument is parallel to the argument for why Russellians should accept Sentence truth. This is unsurprising, because on the view being considered, the content of (8), as an internal negation, is an ordinary atomic, Russellian proposition. However, this establishes the point only for truth, not for falsity.

I will now consider falsity. The possibilities for the falsity of (8) are:

- Sentence (8) is false if and only if $\neg\neg\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x))$. (wide)
- Sentence (8) is false if and only if $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \neg\neg\text{Planet}(x))$. (narrow)

The wide option results from adding a negation with widest scope to the wide option for truth; the narrow option results from adding a negation with narrowest scope to the narrow option for truth. These are the two ways that Russellians might consider reading the right hand side of a claim such as Sentence falsity. Both options, after cancelling double negations, are equivalent to:

- Sentence (8) is false if and only if $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x))$.

In effect, both the wide and narrow options end up with the same result, so it does not matter which one is adopted.

Generalising from the example of (8) to all internal negations, the claims that Russellians ought to accept are Sentence truth for internal negation and Sentence falsity for internal negation.

Sentence truth for internal negation ‘ a is not- F ’ is true if and only if the referent of a does not have the property denoted by F , i.e., $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_a!x \wedge \neg Fx)$.

Sentence falsity for internal negation ‘ a is not- F ’ is false if and only if the referent of a has the property denoted by F , i.e., $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_a!x \wedge Fx)$.

These two premises, about contraries and about truth and falsity for internal negations, can be used to make a stronger claim, which is important for deciding what the Russellian should say about empty names. All Russellians should accept Sentence falsity in either its narrow or wide reading. The question is whether the right hand side should be $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_a!x \wedge \neg Fx)$ (narrow) or $\neg\exists x(\mathbf{R}_a!x \wedge Fx)$ (wide). Defenders of the Gappy proposition view and Nonsingular proposition view will insist on the wide option, because otherwise their view leads to contradiction. However, once Sentence falsity for internal negation has been accepted, there is a way to argue for the narrow version of Sentence falsity. The argument is based on the premise that a sentence, like (1), and its internal negation, in this case (8), should have the following property: they should be *contrary*, i.e., such that they cannot both be true, but not contradictory, i.e., such that if one is true then the other is false, and *vice versa*.

Here is the argument for the stronger claim mentioned above, i.e., that, because Russellians should accept Sentence falsity for internal negation and Sentence truth for internal negation, they should also accept the narrow option for Sentence falsity, given the assumption that a sentence and its internal negation are contrary. If (8) is false, then $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x))$, by Sentence falsity for internal negation. Suppose that, if (1) is false, then $\neg\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x))$. This is

supposing the wide option for Sentence falsity. So, if both (8) and (1) are false, the following contradiction is true: $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x)) \wedge \neg \exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x))$. So, (8) and (1) cannot both be false. This would make (8) and (1) contradictory, rather than just contrary. But, (8) and (1) are a sentence and its internal negation; they should be contrary, not contradictory. So, we should reject the assumption that lead to the result that they cannot both be false, which is the assumption of the wide option for sentence falsity.

Given that the wide and narrow options for sentence falsity are exhaustive, the way to avoid that result is to say that if (1) is false, then $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \neg \text{Planet}(x))$, the narrow option for Sentence falsity. In that case, both (1) and (8) might be false; the falsity of one does not entail the truth of the other, nor *vice versa*.¹⁰

So, from Russellian principles, and the premise that (1) and (8), taken as internal negation, are contrary but not contradictory, I have argued for a conclusion which, generalised, gives us:

Sentence falsity (narrow) A sentence of the form ‘*a* is *F*’ is false if and only if the referent of ‘*a*’ does not have the property denoted by ‘*F*’, i.e., $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \neg \text{Planet}(x))$.

I conclude that Russellians ought to accept Sentence falsity (narrow). Sentence falsity (narrow) entails that if a sentence such as (2) is false, the name in it has a referent, because the negation in the right hand side of the claim has narrow scope. It follows from this, as I will argue in subsection 5.4, that Russellians should not assign contents to sentences containing empty names.

One might now worry about the following seemingly awkward result. I am defending the view that sentences containing empty names do not have contents, and therefore do not have truth values. I say this about (2) and (9), and I say that they are contraries. This means that they cannot both be true, even though they might both be false. I do not say that they actually are both false, nor that one is true and the other false. I do not find this result awkward. When I say that these two sentences are contrary, what I mean is that, in virtue of their form, these sentences are such that certain distributions of truth value are impossible for them. Such sentences might or might not express propositions, and, so, might or might not have truth values. They cannot both be true, but they might both be false. As long as being contrary is understood in this way, as conditional on having truth values at all, there is nothing inconsistent about saying that two sentences which actually do not have truth values are contrary. The Russellian should be careful to understand being contrary in this way when they are formulating their view.

5.3 The problem with indeterminacy

I have, in subsection 5.1 and subsection 5.2 presented a problem with assigning true propositions to sentences like (2) and for assigning false propositions to sentences like (2). This, in subsection 5.4, will be the basis of an argument

¹⁰It is clear that (1) and (8) cannot both be true, given Sentence truth and Sentence truth for internal negation. If (8) is true, then $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \neg \text{Planet}(x))$, by Sentence truth for internal negation. And, if (1) is true, then $\exists x(\mathbf{R}_{\text{Neptune}}!x \wedge \text{Planet}(x))$, by Sentence truth.

against the nonsingular proposition view and the GPF version of the gappy proposition view. This leaves the other version of the gappy proposition view, GPI, defended by Salmon. A defender of the no proposition view cannot argue against GPI on the basis that it does not assign truth values to sentences like (2) because that is a feature that the views share.

One possibility is to make a Russellian argument against GPI. Braun argues for assigning the truth value false to a gappy proposition on the basis that a gappy proposition is a proposition, and therefore truth apt, and that such a proposition is not true (Braun 2005, 606–7).¹¹ Rather than pursue that option, I will argue that, if gappy propositions lack truth values, they explain nothing that the no proposition view cannot also explain. Because gappy propositions are a theoretical posit over and above Russellian propositions, they must be justified by an explanatory role. So, they are not justified.

In defence of the first premise, I will consider some candidates for an explanatory role. Firstly, explaining the (alleged) fact that sentences like (2) have truth values. GPI cannot explain that, because it does not entail it. Secondly, explaining some particular distribution of truth values to sentences in the example set, or speakers' intuitions about such a distribution of truth values. The only distribution that GPI could explain is the same as the one that the no proposition view could explain; and these views both explain the same speakers' intuitions. GPI would have an advantage if propositional content was required to explain the possibility of using sentences in the example set to convey propositions with truth values. However, as I argued in subsection 4.1, it is not clear that propositional content is required for such explanations.

The third and fourth candidates appeal to a genuine difference between the no proposition view and GPI: whether or not sentences like (2) have propositional contents. The third candidate explanatory role is the alleged fact that such sentences do have such contents. In the current context this is not an argument for GPI but just an assertion that the view is preferable to the no proposition view. The fourth candidate explanatory role is explaining the meaningfulness of sentences like (2). However, as I argued in subsection 4.4, there are alternative explanations of this fact.

The final candidate I will consider takes the discussion into an area I have avoided: propositional attitudes. It might be suggested that any version of the gappy proposition view is better than the no proposition view because such a view can account for their being objects for, e.g., believers to stand in the belief relation to. Braun (2005), for example, takes this to be a reason to favour the gappy proposition view, although Braun (1993) did not take it to be decisive. The question that needs to be asked about such an argument is whether there are compelling reasons to think that subjects stand in relations to propositions when they have mental states that we might describe as 'believing that Vulcan is a planet'; the alleged reasons would have to be compelling enough to justify

¹¹Braun (2005, 604–5) is responding to, among others Salmon (1998, 381). Salmon's point is that many things are not true and are thereby not false. Braun's reply is that those things are not propositions. I take it that Braun is assuming bivalence for propositions, i.e., that there are no further truth values than true and false. Braun also discusses an argument by Adams and Stecker (1994) for the conclusion that gappy propositions lack truth value and attributes the view to Reimer (2001a); Reimer (2001b).

assigning a semantic content to (2) when there are otherwise no reasons to do so. To make this response fully would require a complete theory of attitude reports compatible with Russellianism, which I will not attempt.

Other roles might be suggested, and I have not provided an argument that no role can be found. So, I conclude only tentatively that there is nothing that a view should explain that GPI explains and that the no proposition view does not explain. This counts against GPI because positing a new sort of entity to play a role in our theories should be done only if these entities play some explanatory role.

Gappy propositions are a new sort of entity, distinct from ordinary structured propositions, because one kind has properties that the other lacks. For any ordinary structured proposition, that proposition represents some object to have some property, or some objects to stand in some relation, or, for nonsingular propositions, some properties to be arranged in some way. I use ‘represent’ here to mean ‘is true if and only if . . .’, i.e., when I say that the proposition $\langle _ , \text{planet} \rangle$ represents Neptune as being a planet I mean that it is true if and only if Neptune has the property of being a planet. I thereby avoid problems about the nature of propositional representation.¹² Generalising, the claim is that ordinary structured propositions represent in the sense that they are true depending on which objects have which properties, or stand in which relations, or in terms of how certain properties are arranged.

Gappy propositions lack this property. $\langle _ , \text{planet} \rangle$ does not represent anything to be a planet, or anything else.¹³ This shows that there is an important difference between ordinary structured propositions and gappy propositions. It is therefore an additional claim that there are gappy propositions, i.e., semantic contents which do not represent, in addition to ordinary structured propositions, i.e., semantic contents which do represent. As an additional claim, GPI must be justified with additional explanatory power. I have argued that there are no additional explanations to be found, so, I conclude that positing indeterminate gappy propositions is not well motivated.

5.4 The argument for the no proposition view

From Sentence falsity for internal negation it follows that sentences like (9) cannot be assigned false propositions as contents when they contain an empty name. If they are, and the negation is internal, it will follow that the right hand

¹²In recent debates about what propositions are, propositions are sometimes said to be representational and sometimes not. Merricks (2015) takes representation to be essential, and argues on that basis against Russellian views. King has a view compatible with Russellianism King (2007); King, Soames, and Speaks (2014, chap. 4). King says that propositions represent, but takes this to be equivalent to their having truth conditions (King, Soames, and Speaks 2014, 47). Soames and Hanks have different theories of the nature of propositions, but they both say that a major goal of a theory of propositions is to explain how it is that propositions represent (King, Soames, and Speaks 2014, chap. 6; Soames 2015; Hanks 2015). Speaks says that propositions do not represent, but do have truth values (King, Soames, and Speaks 2014, chap. 5). Richard (2013) and Grzankowski and Buchanan (2019) also take this view.

¹³On similar lines, Mousavian (2011, 131–32) argues against gappy propositions on the basis that they do not represent, and therefore that they are not propositions. One might say that there is a sense that properties represent, and that a gappy proposition represents in this sense. But, properties are not true or false, so any sense in which they represent is not the sense that is at issue here.

side of Sentence falsity for internal negation is true, which entails that the name is not empty. Sentences like (9) cannot be assigned true propositions either, because it will follow from Sentence truth for internal negation that the name in the sentence is not empty. So, no theory that assigns these sentences either true or false propositions can be correct. This does not rely on any particular view about whether these sentences are true or false.

This argument shows that the nonsingular proposition view and the version of the gappy proposition view which says that gappy propositions are false cannot be correct. They cannot be correct because these views would assign false propositions to sentences like (9) when these are read as internal negations. Sentence falsity (narrow) can be used to make the same argument against assigning a true or false proposition to any atomic sentence containing an empty name.

This is a strong reason to decide in favour of the No proposition view and against the gappy proposition view and the nonsingular proposition view. The only version of the view that might avoid this argument, GPI, has been shown to be unmotivated in subsection 5.3. So, Russellians should have a No proposition view of empty names.

This argument can be used to respond to the problem raised in subsection 4.5. The issue there is that while considerations of truth value cannot decide between gappy proposition and nonsingular proposition views, it could be argued that one of these views must be right because sentences containing empty names must be assigned a truth value, or the value true. The argument in this section shows that these views cannot be right.

6 Conclusion

The argument presented in this paper is in one sense a negative argument. It shows that two alternative views cannot be correct. That being said, the argument is motivated by core commitments of Russellianism. These are that sentences are true or false when they express propositions which are true or false, and that these propositions are true or false when certain objects have certain properties. The negative argument is constructed from these core commitments of Russellianism. So, the no proposition view has been shown to be the best way to develop these core commitments.

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