

## Canonical Property Designators

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### *Abstract:*

The article scrutinises the semantics of canonical property designators of the forms ‘the property of being *F*’ and ‘*F*-ness’. *First* it is argued that, as their form suggests, the former are definite definitions, albeit of a special sort. *Secondly*, the *prima facie* plausible classification of the latter as proper names (which is often met in philosophical writings) is rejected. The semantics of such terms is developed and it is shown how its proper understanding yields important consequences about the concepts expressed by these terms.

### Introduction

Explicit discourse about properties is ubiquitous: we are accustomed to refer to properties, to predicate something of them, and to quantify over them. Reference to properties is most often achieved by singular terms that are nominalizations of predicative phrases (i.e. either of general terms or of predicates). The semantics of such nominalized designators are highly peculiar; its investigation is the purpose of this article. The results will, *firstly*, be relevant to the philosophy of language and issues about singular terms. *Secondly*, they will bear upon the understanding of the conceptual framework of properties underlying ordinary parlance.

A brief comment on *methodology*: the present article avoids disputes about whether we should take apparent reference to properties at face value, or whether we had better take a nominalistic stance towards them. It simply presupposes that things behave as they seem to do; thus, a realist view about property discourse is adopted without discussion.<sup>1</sup> The article focuses on the question how, *given a realist view*, we should understand the semantics of nominalized property designators. Therefore, the article is a piece of *hypothetical, descriptive* metaphysics: it is descriptive in examining a certain part of our

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<sup>1</sup> Whether a realist view is correct hinges in particular upon the question whether all apparent reference to (and quantification over) properties can be provided with an adequate, non-realist analysis. For some classic discussion see Pap (1959), Jackson (1977), and Loux (1978).

everyday conceptual scheme, and it is hypothetical because it starts from a realist hypothesis taken for granted.

## 1. Canonical Designators of Properties

### *a. The Main Question*

Although there are other interesting ways to refer to attributes,<sup>2</sup> this discussion will concentrate on two sorts of property designators: abstract nouns, such as ‘wisdom’ or ‘verbosity’, and gerundive constructions of the form ‘the property of being *F*’. These expressions play a pivotal role both in everyday property talk and in the parlance of “experts”, i.e. in ontological debates. That is why these expressions will be called *canonical property designators*. The main question of this investigation can then be posed as follows:

What is the semantic profile of canonical property designators?

The question will be approached by a discussion of what *kind* of singular term canonical designators instantiate. Among non-indexical kinds of singular terms, definite descriptions and proper names form the two classes most intensively discussed by philosophers. Indeed, some philosophers seem to suggest that these two classes, together with indexical phrases (including demonstratives), furnish an exhaustive subdivision of singular terms. Do canonical property designators fit into the scheme? It seemed so to many philosophers: while ‘the property of being verbose’ looks like a definite description, ‘wisdom’ looks like a proper name. This makes the following theses attractive:

- (S-1) Gerundive constructions of the form ‘the property of being *F*’ are definite descriptions for properties.
- (S-2) Abstract nouns are proper names for properties.

I shall argue, however, that (S-2) is mistaken, whereas (S-1), while true in spirit, has to be supplemented with an account of a peculiar kind of definite descriptions, namely *appositive* ones.

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<sup>2</sup> As noted, for example, by Strawson (1974: 129).

*b. Two Kinds of Canonical Property Designators*

Before the main question is addressed, some preliminary remarks on canonical designators will be in order. Both gerundive constructions and abstract nouns are (generally) nominalizations of predicative phrases. Thus, although abstract nouns, such as ‘redness’, ‘wisdom’, ‘tranquillity’, ‘brevity’, or ‘courage’, are nouns in their own rights, the vast majority of these are obviously derived from adjectives (‘courage’, however, already shows that this is not always the case). It should be obvious from the examples that the derivation is not as uniform as some philosophers may suggest when they choose the schematic ‘*F*-ness’ as a representative for this kind of expression. So, the present discussion will deviate from this habit in order to stress the non-uniformity. It will use ‘ $F_{\text{[NOUN]}}$ ’ as a placeholder for the appropriate derived noun corresponding to the general term ‘*F*’. Example: if *F* is ‘wise’, then  $F_{\text{[NOUN]}}$  is ‘wisdom’. Gerundive constructions, on the other hand, afford us a wholly systematic way of deriving property terms from general terms by building a gerund (after adding, if necessary, the copula ‘be’) and prefixing the result by expressions like ‘the property of’, ‘the quality of’ etc. In this way we build expressions of the form ‘the property (or: quality etc.) of being *F*’ as for example ‘the property of being naughty’, or ‘the quality of being eatable’.

There is no principled limit to the complexity of the general terms which can be nominalized to yield designators of the form ‘the property of being *F*’; any general terms, even very complex ones containing multiple logical connectives, will do (although the results may, if the general terms are particularly complex, become quite cumbersome). This observation immediately yields a philosophical lesson: the conception of properties that manifests itself in everyday discourse is extremely rich. It differs crucially from the *sparse* conceptions of properties with which one major strand of philosophical interest in properties during the last twenty five years has been concerned. Of course, this does not at all count against sparse theories of properties, which are just not intended to interpret the conception of properties manifested in everyday discourse; they are *revisionary* in spirit, not descriptive.<sup>3</sup>

It should be mentioned that the abundance of the ordinary conception of properties does *not* imply that properties, thus conceived, are *mere shadows* of predicates, as it is sometimes maintained.<sup>4</sup> Or, to put it more cautiously: in at least one reading, this metaphor is mistaken. Shadows do not subsist without that which casts them. But it is easy to prove

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<sup>3</sup> Thus, Armstrong (1978 II: 18), who initiated the interest in sparse conceptions, explicitly distinguishes his conception of properties from the abundant conception of ordinary discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Cp. Armstrong (1978 II: 18; 1992: 166).

that there are more properties than predicates in natural language (and even more than there *could be* predicates in a language with a finite stock of primitive symbols): for every real number  $x$ , there is the property of being greater than  $x$ . Since there are only denumerably many predicates, properties clearly outnumber predicates.<sup>5</sup> Properties, as conceived of in ordinary thinking, are abundant, but they are neither linguistic entities nor dependent upon them.

## 2. ‘The property of being $F$ ’

### *a. Definite Descriptions*

Let us now examine gerundive constructions, for which ‘the property of being verbose’ may serve as a representative example. To have a short term for them, I call such expressions *gerundives* (in contrast to *gerunds*, by which I mean phrases of the form ‘being  $F$ ’ or ‘ $\phi$ -ing’). Gerundives have a *syntactic* feature that is prototypical for definite expressions: they consist of the definite article followed by a complex noun phrase.<sup>6</sup> But classifying an expression as a definite description, in the common philosophical sense of the phrase, is not a matter of purely syntactic considerations. In grouping expressions together under the title of *definite descriptions* one aims to demarcate a class of expressions sharing a certain *semantic* feature.<sup>7</sup>

A standard Russellian account of definite descriptions will be relied upon here. Accordingly, in order to qualify as a definite description, an expression of the form ‘the  $\phi$ ’ should satisfy the following schema:

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<sup>5</sup> Cp. Tye (1982: 53).

<sup>6</sup> However, the definite article should not be taken as a *necessary* ingredient of a definite description: certain expressions of different forms should reasonably be counted as definite descriptions (e.g. genitive constructions as ‘Jennifer’s husband’; cf. Neale 1990: 35).

<sup>7</sup> After all, one and the same *string of letters* may *function* as a definite description in one context while not in the other. An example:

- (1) Then the girl with the Michael Myers-mask went home.
- (2) Chrille terrified the girl with the Michael Myers-mask by suddenly putting it on.

The expression ‘the girl with the Michael Myers-mask’ appears in both sentences, but only in (1) it is used as singular term, while it does not even form a semantic unit in (2). Furthermore, expressions of the form ‘the  $\phi$ ’ can both be used (i) for making general statements (cp. Moore 1944: 214f. and Vendler 1967: 53) and (ii) as proper names (*The man who wasn’t there* is a film, not a man).

(RD) For all  $x$ : ‘the  $\varphi$ ’ denotes  $x \leftrightarrow$   
 (i)  $x$  is a  $\varphi$  & (ii) apart from  $x$  there is no other  $\varphi$ .<sup>8</sup>

We may notice that *if* gerundive are definite descriptions, they are descriptions of a special sort, because they are rigid designators.<sup>9</sup> But rigidity does not deprive an expression of its status as a definite description, and it makes no difference to the applicability of (RD) whether a given expression is rigid or not. ‘The even prime number’ obviously passes the test just as well as ‘the current prime minister of England’.

So the crucial question is: can we apply (RD) to the gerundive discussed? Let us give it a try:

For all  $x$ : ‘the property of being verbose’ denotes  $x \leftrightarrow$   
 (i)  $x$  is a property of being verbose &  
 (ii) apart from  $x$  there is no other property of being verbose.

The attempt is a failure; clauses (i) and (ii) are hardly correct English. The reason is basically that while ‘property’ functions as a count noun and thus combines well with the indefinite article (and allows for the plural form), the whole phrase ‘property of being verbose’ is peculiar and only accepts the definite article as a determiner.

### *b. Appositive Descriptions*

Nevertheless, it will be argued, gerundives *are* definite descriptions, albeit a peculiar *sort* thereof: as others have surmised before, the role of a prefix such as ‘the property of’ is that of an *apposition*,<sup>10</sup> comparable to the role of ‘the number’ in ‘the number seven’ or ‘the poet’ in ‘the poet Burns’. Although this view already has its proponents, it has not yet been thoroughly worked out; these lines are meant to close the gap.

For a start, let us take a look at appositive constructions such as ‘the poet Burns’ or ‘the name “John”’. These expressions, the appositive part of which is called *close* or *restrictive*, are but one of several kinds of expression that linguists regard as appositive;<sup>11</sup> but they are the only ones relevant to the present concern. These expressions have a peculiar structure that distinguishes them from ordinary definite descriptions: the definite

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<sup>8</sup> More formally:  $\forall x$  (‘the  $\varphi$ ’ denotes  $x \leftrightarrow \forall y$  ( $y$  is a  $\varphi \leftrightarrow y=x$ )).

<sup>9</sup> See Tye (1981: 24) and cp. Schnieder (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Cp. Wolterstorff (1970: 70ff.), Levinson (1978: 9f.), Wiggins (1984: 320), and Teichmann (1989: 143f.). Austin (1954: 165f.) held the analogous view about the prefix ‘the fact’ in expressions of the form ‘the fact that  $p$ ’.

<sup>11</sup> Cp. for instance Meyer (1992).

article is followed by a combination of a general term and a singular term which has the same reference as the whole phrase. Thus, while the form of ordinary descriptions may be represented by ‘the  $\phi$ ’, the structure of appositive terms can be represented by ‘the  $\phi a$ ’.

For the whole phrase to be non-empty, the appositive prefix needs to be true of its referent (the poet Burns is *a poet*, just as the number seven is *a number*). Because appositives such as ‘the poet Burns’ therefore contain some descriptive part which is relevant to their reference, we may regard them as a special kind of definite description and call them *appositive descriptions*. Although the Russellian apparatus, in the form provided by (RD), is not capable of dealing with them, a natural expansion of it does the trick. The problem with appositive descriptions of the form ‘the  $\phi a$ ’ is that the noun phrase following the definite article, ‘ $\phi a$ ’, cannot be used as a general term that would accept an indefinite article (as would be required to apply (RD) to them). But if we break it up into its two parts, we can handle both of them separately. The first easily fits into the existing scheme; the second is a singular term, and to build a predicate from it we can add the sign of identity. The poet Burns is someone who is both *a poet* and *identical* with Burns. Thus, appositive terms can be given the following analysis:

(RD\*) For all  $x$ : ‘the  $\phi a$ ’ denotes  $x \leftrightarrow$  (i)  $x$  is a  $\phi$  & (ii)  $x = a$ .<sup>12</sup>

(Notice that (RD\*) can do without the second Russellian condition ‘apart from  $x$  there is no other  $\phi$ ’, because uniqueness is already secured by the singular term employed in the identity clause.)

### *c. Gerundives as Appositive Descriptions*

Now back to property terms of the form ‘the property of being  $F$ ’. To justify the classification of a gerundive as an appositive description, it has to be shown that it possesses the common form of such expressions, ‘the  $\phi a$ ’, i.e. that it is composed of

- (i) the definite article (which is obvious),
- (ii) a general term true of the referent of the whole term, and
- (iii) a singular and coreferential term.

Ad (iii): expressions of the form ‘the property of being  $F$ ’ do in fact contain a singular term that is coreferential with the whole term, namely the gerund ‘being  $F$ ’. That this latter can itself be used as a singular term for a property becomes clear from statements such as:

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<sup>12</sup> An equivalent suggestion is made by Neale (1990: 116, n.55).

Being earnest is an indispensable property in some social environments,  
or (an example taken from non-philosophical prose to show that these constructions are  
not inventions for the proof of a philosophical point):

‘Being natural is only a pose, and the most irritating pose I know of,’ cried Lord  
Henry, laughing [...]. (Oscar Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*)

One thing should be evident from these constructions: being earnest is a *property* (or:  
quality etc.) – but then it is nothing different from *the property of being earnest*. The  
following schema is generally valid:

(=) Being *F* = the property of being *F*.

To hold that (=) is valid does not amount to the claim that *wherever* a gerund occurs it is  
used as a designator of a property. A gerund may well be systematically ambiguous (when  
it forms a part of the continuous tenses, for example, it is apparently not used as a singular  
term at all). There is an instructive similarity here between gerunds and phrases of the  
form ‘to be *F*’. While those latter *can* be used as designators of properties (‘*To be an  
honest man* is the virtue I long for.’), they have other uses where they are substitutable for  
that-clauses and rather denote an entity of a propositional nature (‘Belmondo believes  
himself *to be charming*’). Something similar even goes for a number of abstract nouns;  
while ‘wisdom’ and ‘beauty’ can be used as designators of properties, they can also be  
used as general terms for entities which have the said properties, as in ‘It is an old wisdom  
that life is brief yet art is eternal’ or ‘Three beauties appeared at my door’.

Ad (ii): In ‘the property of being verbose’, the prefix consists of the definite article and  
the general term ‘property’ which is *true of* the referent of the whole term. Certainly, the  
property of being verbose *is* a property. We may also use other general terms for similar  
constructions (‘the quality of being wise’); and the terms used need not be *formal*, but may  
be more specific material terms such as ‘virtue’ (‘the virtue of being wise’). Furthermore,  
we may supplement the prefixes with additional adjectival modifications (as in ‘the rare  
virtue of wisdom’). These possibilities support the present analysis of these terms, as does  
the fact that we can also prefix property terms of another sort, abstract nouns like  
‘wisdom’, with the same prefixes and talk of *the property of wisdom* etc.

So far then, the structure of ‘the property of being verbose’ conforms to that of an  
appositive description. However, in addition to the article and the general term, the prefix  
contains a third element, the ‘of’. Its presence does not speak against the analysis of the  
term as an appositive description, though; it lends even further support to it, since the  
appositive usage of ‘of’ is familiar from other constructions, such as ‘the city of

Westminster’ or ‘the name of “John”’. This appositive use of ‘of’ needs to be distinguished from its truly *relational* use, which it exhibits, for example, in

My ear seemed to have the properties of an eye; a visible image pestered my fancy in the darkness [...]. (Nathaniel Hawthorne: *Mosses from an Old Manse*)

or in ‘He inherited the whole property of the late Aga Khan’.<sup>13</sup> There is a simple criterion for telling these uses apart: in its appositive usage, the ‘of’ could be replaced by a colon, without change of sense and without rendering the phrase in which it occurs unintelligible (not so in the last two examples, which become ill-formed after the replacement).

By addressing points (ii) and (iii) and the appositive status of the ‘of’, the grounds have been laid for a proper semantic analysis of gerundives: we have seen that they cannot be treated by means of the usual Russellian apparatus (expressed in (RD)). But there is a modification of this apparatus applicable to appositive descriptions, expressed in (RD\*) (a tool we need independently of property terms as soon as we have realised that there are such expressions as appositive descriptions). Having analysed the structure of gerundives, we can now apply (RD\*) to them:

‘the property of being verbose’ denotes  $x \leftrightarrow$

(i)  $x$  is a property & (ii) being verbose =  $x$ .

The applicability of (RD\*) to gerundives completes the case for the present analysis: canonical property designators of the form ‘the property of being  $F$ ’ are appositive descriptions for properties.

Finally it should be noted that it is *not* part of the defended view that *every* expression of the form ‘the  $\phi$  of being  $F$ ’ is an appositive description. There would be clear counterexamples to such a thesis: ‘the importance of being earnest’, for instance, is not an appositive description. The reason is simple: *being earnest* is important, but it is not *an importance*. The ‘of’ in ‘the importance of being earnest’ therefore is *not* the appositive ‘of’; it could not be replaced with a colon, without destroying the sense of the expression.

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<sup>13</sup> The examples illustrate that ‘of’ can signify different kinds of possession relation (thereby mirroring the manifold uses of ‘possess’ and ‘have’), such as material possession (‘the property of Aga Khan’), natural relationship (‘the son of my daughter’), legal relationship (‘the husband of Mary’), habitual occupation (‘that is the desk of the secretary’), or exemplification of a quality (and probably a lot more).



*d. Substitution Failure*

Having presented the case for the analysis of gerundives as appositive descriptions, a certain problem for this view needs to be discussed. The analysis presupposes that a gerund (e.g. ‘being verbose’), as contained in a gerundive (e.g. ‘the property of being verbose’), is a singular term for a property. This presupposition may seem false for the following reason: given an instance of (=), the two expressions flanking the identity sign cannot be substituted *salva veritate* in all contexts. This is owing to the fact that sometimes they cannot even be substituted *salva congruitate* (i.e. without becoming ill-formed), as in the case of the following pair of statements:

- (1) Socrates had the property of being verbose.
- (?1) Socrates had being verbose.

Some philosophers would think this shows that ascribing singular termhood to gerunds was a failure.<sup>14</sup> After all, these terms would violate an important principle, sometimes called upon in the philosophy of language, which Crispin Wright (1998: 240) recently dubbed the *Reference Principle*:

- (RP) Coreferential singular terms are substitutable *salva congruitate* in all contexts.

Some reflection, however, shows that (RP) is generally at odds with the existence of appositive singular terms and should be dismissed as a wrong linguistic generalisation based on a too meagre diet of examples. Gerundive constructions share the peculiarities they exhibit with other appositive expressions. As Wolterstorff (1970: 70f.) noted, the expression

- (J) ‘John’

is indisputably a singular term that denotes a proper name. Its denotation is the name ‘John’, and thus the term ‘John’ is coreferential with the complex term

- (J\*) the name ‘John’.

But (J) and (J\*) are, though coreferential, not exchangeable *salva congruitate*. Take the sentence:

- (2) They gave him the name ‘John’,

and substitute the contained (J\*) by (J). The result is ill-formed:

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance Steward (1997: 107).

(?2) They gave him ‘John’.

Now, the example may seem somewhat fishy at first. It presupposes that ‘the name “John”’ functions *as a genuine singular term* in (2). But perhaps this assumption gets the logical form of (2) wrong, since only “John” functions as a singular term in (2), while ‘the name’ is part of the idiomatic *predicate* ‘give the name’ and not of the singular term. Then, the logical form of (2) would best be represented by

gave-name (they, him, ‘John’),

and not by

gave (they, him, the name ‘John’).

But even if appealing at first, this objection is problematic in itself. To see this, consider yet another term with the same reference as (J):

(J\*\*) the forename of JFK.

This term *can* be substituted for the coreferential (J\*) as it occurs in (2), yielding the true and well-formed

(2\*) They gave him the forename of JFK.

Here, (J\*\*) must be functioning as a genuine singular term, because the logical form of the sentence could certainly not be represented by

gave-name (they, him, *of the US president Kennedy*).

But still, (2\*) generates failure of substitutivity: replacing (J\*\*) by (J) would again result in the defective (?2).<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, there are many cases similar to Wolterstorff’s example in which a similar objection would not get off the ground: even though ‘Morrissey’ and ‘my favourite singer’, as I currently use them, are coreferential singular terms, you cannot replace the first by the second in the expression ‘the inimitable Morrissey’ without producing gibberish.

The lesson to be learned is that appositive terms sometimes follow rather peculiar rules as to the position in which they can occur in a sentence. The recognition of appositive

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<sup>15</sup> Finally, it should be noticed that in any case, sentence (2) contains an occurrence of (J), no matter how the logical form of (2) should be parsed. But if we substitute this occurrence by an occurrence of (J\*), we get an unacceptable result:

(?2\*) They gave him the name the name ‘John’.

singular terms requires us to carefully modify some generalisations about the behaviour of singular terms; in particular, Wright's (RP) proves to be an over-generalisation.

*e. Informative and Redundant Appositions*

One may wonder, finally, what the point of using an appositive prefix such as 'the property of' might be. After all, it may seem quite redundant (which might make the analysis less attractive).

In general, appositions can fulfil a variety of jobs: in combination with proper names that are potentially shared by numerous people they often provide a hint as to the actual reference of the proper name. But they may also be used to incorporate pejorative asides ('George, this bastard, did it again. '), to flaunt one's broad knowledge ('That reminds me of a story about Danaë, daughter of Akrisios and Eurydike. ') or simply to provide some information less important than what is said with the main predicate of an utterance.

What is peculiar about 'the property of' is that this apposition seems to be *redundant* from an epistemic point of view. That *being verbose* is a property is quite evident. Indeed, this seems to be a certain kind of categorial knowledge that one can hardly lack if one knows what it is to be a property at all. But analogous claims are true of 'the number' in 'the number seven'. We thus have to acknowledge the existence of what can be called *pleonastic* appositions. A detailed account of their functions cannot be given here, but one thing that appears to be important to their usage should be mentioned: the terms with which they are combined are often ambiguous and sometimes even allow for uses with differing *grammatical* status. An example might illustrate this: imagine I am speculating about the mystical meaning of the number seven. Asked what I am doing, I may answer

(3) I am thinking about the number seven,

while I would not be understood by replying

(?3) I am thinking about seven.

At best this would provoke the further question: 'About seven *what?*' The apposition disambiguates the term 'seven', which has both an *adjectival* use for counting and a use as a *designator* of a number. In the case of gerunds, the need for an apposition (which arises only if the gerund does not open the sentence in which it is used) may have to do with the unusual syntax of the construction, and may prevent people from misunderstanding utterances containing it.

*f. A New Question: The Semantics of Gerunds*

The sections above contain a detailed defence of the thesis that gerundives (expressions of the form ‘the property of being  $F$ ’) are appositive descriptions. In due course, it turned out that these property designators contain other property designators, the pure gerunds (‘being  $F$ ’). So now a new question arises: What kind of singular term are these latter terms? An answer will be provided in the following section.

### 3. Gerunds (‘Being $F$ ’)

Because of the absence of the definite article, the form of a gerund like ‘being verbose’ does not immediately suggest that the term might be a definite description. But, as I have noted before, the article is not a *conditio sine qua non* when it comes to definite descriptions. What may still make one wonder whether the expression should be classified as a description is that it obviously contains descriptive elements. But these (and this is the reason why the verdict must be in the negative) do not describe the entity *denoted* by the expression – the property of being verbose is not itself verbose. (There are a few exceptions to this rule: the attribute of being abstract, for instance, is itself abstract.) Rather, the descriptive parts of such a term describe those entities that *possess* the property denoted. Hence, gerunds do not form a subclass of definite descriptions.

If the distinction between proper names and definite descriptions were a strict dichotomy, it would follow that gerunds are proper names. But this is quite implausible. They bear distinctive marks which proper names typically lack:

- (G-1) Gerunds are *semantically complex*, and they are complex in such a way that the conditions of understanding them systematically depend upon the conditions of understanding the involved terms. Whoever understands the general term  $F$  and who knows the derivational rules of building gerunds can understand the corresponding expression ‘being  $F$ ’. Furthermore, whoever understands ‘being  $F$ ’ (used to denote a property) must know that exactly those things have the denoted property, of which the embedded general term  $F$  is true.
- (G-2) The reference of a gerund is a function of the meaning of the embedded general term(s). Thus, the meaning of ‘verbose’ determines the reference of ‘being verbose’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cp. Strawson (1953/54: 256f.).

- (G-3) Knowledge of the meaning of a gerund suffices for knowledge of its referent. Understanding ‘being verbose’ is enough for knowing to what it refers.<sup>17</sup>

Principle (G-3) is not strictly universally valid; there are a few exceptions to it owing to the existence of predicates that engender paradox when nominalized. The Russellian property of not exemplifying itself, cannot, on pain of contradiction, exist. For if it existed, we could ask whether it exemplifies itself or not. But, as is well known, both assumptions would lead to serious trouble. So there is no such property and the term ‘exemplifying itself’ lacks reference. But this is far from *evident*, and one may well err in believing the term to have a reference; so (G-3) may fail for cases in which the gerund lacks reference for reasons of logic.

This is the usual way of establishing that there is no Russellian property; it is worthwhile to see that one hereby implicitly relies on principles (G-1) and (G-2): we understand the gerund ‘exemplifying itself’ because we understand the verb ‘to exemplify’ and we know, in virtue of our understanding the term, that if it had any denotation at all, it would denote a property which all those things have in common that do not exemplify themselves. But there cannot be such a property, and thus the meaning of the term rules out its having a reference.

#### 4. Abstract Nouns (‘*F*-ness’)

Turning to abstract nouns (‘wisdom’) one may be tempted, particularly in virtue of their form (being a single substantive used as a singular term), to classify them as proper names. And indeed, philosophers have often given in to this temptation: according to Michael Loux (1978: 168), for example, abstract nouns are ‘what correspond to [proper names] of objects in the case of attributes’.<sup>18</sup> And John Stuart Mill assimilates abstract nouns to proper names by holding that both of them *denote* but lack connotation (i.e. descriptive meaning):

Thus John, or London, or England, are names which signify a subject only. Whiteness, length, virtue, signify an attribute only. None of these names, therefore, are connotative. (*System* Book I, Ch. ii, § 5: 31)

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<sup>17</sup> Similar observations can be found in Künne (1983: 177f.), Levinson (1978: 16), Peterson (1986: 298), and Schiffer (1990: 604).

<sup>18</sup> Others judged similarly to Loux; see for example Plantinga (1974: 31), or Teichmann (1992: 67f.), who calls abstract nouns ‘putative property-names’ (where the ‘putative’ is owed to his general worries about reference to properties).

Now, of course, there *could* be proper names for attributes. Nothing would prevent us, for instance, from calling wisdom ‘Fred’ (though it is hard to imagine what circumstances could lead us to do so). There might be more realistic situations of baptising properties: some scientific contexts, perhaps, can fruitfully be described as introducing names for properties that are picked out by some functional description (‘Let us call the property that is causally responsible for the behaviour of this stuff *C-ness*.’).

But abstract nouns are not normally introduced like that, and assimilating them to proper names rests on a misconception. The semantic profile of most abstract nouns (namely all those derived from predicative phrases) differs crucially from that of proper names, in that the above observations about the semantics of gerundives directly apply to abstract nouns as well:

- (D-1) Derived abstract nouns are associated with complex conditions of understanding that systematically depend upon the conditions of understanding the corresponding general term: whoever both understands the general term  $F$  and knows how to derive the designator  $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$  will also understand this expression.
- (D-2) The reference of a derived abstract noun is a function of the meaning of the corresponding general term(s). Thus, the meaning of ‘verbose’ determines the reference of ‘verbosity’.
- (D-3) Knowledge of the meaning of a derived abstract noun suffices for knowledge of its referent. Understanding ‘verbosity’ is enough for knowing to what it refers.

Abstract nouns such as ‘redness’, ‘verbosity’, ‘wisdom’ etc. have a linguistic meaning that is derived from the meaning of corresponding general terms (‘red’, ‘verbose’, ‘wise’) and that has to be grasped by any competent speaker. And unlike the linguistic meaning which might, owing to certain name-giving conventions (as, for instance, suffixes that indicate gender, the name of the father etc.), be attributed to some proper names, the meaning of abstract nouns is relevant to (and in fact *determines*) their reference. This is why Mill was wrong when he assimilated abstract nouns to proper names, holding both to be connotationless. A term  $t$  is connotative if it implies a property, which means (roughly) that any competent user of  $t$  must know, in virtue of her linguistic competence, that whatever  $t$  denotes has the property implied. But then it follows that, by Mill’s own standards, ‘whiteness’ is after all connotative, since it not only signifies the property whiteness, but it also implies a (second-order) property possessed by the property signified, namely the property of being an attribute common to all and only white objects.

So, how should we finally answer the main question about the status of abstract nouns and gerunds (used as property designators)? We have seen these two sorts of term share certain semantic peculiarities that distinguish them both from definite descriptions (they

do not contain material that is true of their denotation) and from proper names (they have a fully-fledged meaning which determines their reference). Hence, we should acknowledge that they belong to a *sui generis* class of singular terms: non-descriptive, semantically complex terms whose reference is knowable by knowing their meaning.<sup>19</sup> (There may be other members of this kind of singular terms; good candidates would, for instance, be that-clauses, where they are used as singular terms for propositional entities.)

## 5. Consequences and Further Issues

Hitherto, the semantic status of canonical property designators of three types has been discussed: firstly that of gerundives ('the property of being *F*'), which are *appositive* descriptions, and secondly that of gerunds and abstract nouns, which are neither names nor descriptions but serve as a further kind of non-descriptive though linguistically meaningful designator. The peculiarities of this kind of designator have consequences for the concepts expressed by them, which will be developed in the next subsection. Thereafter, the article end with a brief discussion of an open question.

### *a. A Consequence for Canonical Singular Concepts of Properties*

We have seen that canonical designators of properties exhibit complex conditions of understanding: whoever understands the term 'wisdom' must know that it denotes a property possessed by all wise people and only by them. This fact enables us to approach a characterisation of the concept expressed by the abstract noun 'wisdom': the basic idea is that concepts expressed by canonical property designators are derived from the concepts expressed by the associated general terms, in such a way that an understanding of the designator requires knowledge about what it is to have the property; into the content of such knowledge the general concept will enter. Thus, the concept expressed by 'wisdom' is a complex concept whose identity is partially fixed by the following truth:

(Wis)  $x = \text{wisdom} \rightarrow \forall y (y \text{ possesses } x \leftrightarrow y \text{ is wise}).$

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<sup>19</sup> A referee remarked that one might alternatively hold that canonical property terms *are* proper names, but of a very particular kind (since they are not semantically simple, thereby differing crucially from *ordinary* names). It does not seem clear, however, whether this alternative differs substantially from the view defended above, or whether it differs merely in terminology.

Generally, if we have any canonical property designator of either of the forms ‘(the property of) being  $F$ ’ or ‘ $F_{[\text{NOUN}]}$ ’, it will be part of the expressed concept that the denoted property is possessed by all and only  $F$ s.

This result of the current semantic investigation has an immediate and important consequence: while explicit property attributions, such as ‘Socrates possesses wisdom’, are often held to be synonymous with elementary predications, such as ‘Socrates is wise’,<sup>20</sup> this synonymy thesis turns out false in light of the current results. The proposition expressed by an explicit property attribution is of a higher logical complexity than that expressed by the corresponding elementary predication, because the former involves conceptual material whose nature is fixed by recourse to the material involved in the latter.

While (Wis) *partially* explicates the concept expressed by ‘wisdom’, it does not characterize it *completely*: we cannot simply turn (Wis) into a biconditional because two properties may, by sheer accident, be had by the same objects. For a full characterisation of the concept expressed by ‘wisdom’, one could take into account the identity conditions of properties. To draw upon them in a conceptual analysis of property concepts is legitimate only if, in order to understand discourse about properties, one must have at least a grasp of a principle of individuation of properties. But this latter claim is indeed plausible, if it is interpreted with caution: surely, competence in talking about properties does not require any *explicit* knowledge of a criterion of identity for properties, but arguably it does require some primitive form of implicit knowledge that manifests itself in a basic understanding of how to *count* and *re-identify*  $\phi$ s, and thus in the ability to distinguish between a good many true and false identity statements about properties.<sup>21</sup>

But the identity conditions of properties are an issue for another article. Here the point is only the following: a reflection on the understanding conditions of canonical property terms shows that they express complex concepts; and these might even admit of a full-blown analysis once the identity conditions of properties are settled.

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<sup>20</sup> This thesis has been endorsed both by some realists and some nominalists with respect to properties, including for instance Bolzano (*Wissenschaftslehre* II, §127), Ramsey (1925: 404, 416), Strawson (1974: 33), and Quine (1980: 164).

<sup>21</sup> This follows from a general thesis defended by Evans’ (1975: 355f.): we should not interpret a certain kind of discourse as involving reference to  $\phi$ s (and predication about  $\phi$ s) if it is not a requirement of mastering the discourse to know some identity-conditions for  $\phi$ s.



*b. The Relation between Gerunds, Gerundives, and Abstract Nouns*

What has not yet been completely clarified is the semantic relation between gerunds, gerundives and abstract nouns that are derived from the same general term. First of all, they all seem to be co-referential: being wise is a property, so it is certainly nothing but the property of being wise. But this seems to be, in turn, nothing but the property of wisdom. Therefore, ‘being wise’, ‘the property of being wise’, and ‘wisdom’ denote the same property (this reasoning can easily be applied to any corresponding pair of gerundive and abstract noun). Now, since gerunds and abstract nouns furthermore share their semantic profile, it seems attractive to regard them as synonyms.

Or are there reasons that speak against this alleged synonymy? Expressions of the two sorts do not display the same behavior in all respects: we have seen before that gerunds underlie heavy restrictions as to the positions in which they may appear in a sentence, while abstract nouns do not. However, *mere* differences in the syntactic restrictions of two terms do not betoken their non-synonymy. If any two terms are synonymous, then the appositive terms ‘Burns the great poet’ and ‘the great poet Burns’ are. Meaning strictly the same, they differ only in word-order. But while they therefore are clearly synonymous, they allow for different syntactic completion: the first may, for instance, be suffixed with ‘and thinker’, yielding ‘Burns the great poet and thinker’. The same suffix generates garbage when combined with the second phrase: ‘the great poet Burns and thinker’. The differences in syntax that we noticed between abstract nouns and gerunds therefore do not refute the assumption that they could be synonymous.

But there is another difference that weighs more heavily against the synonymy idea: abstract nouns behave in important aspects as *mass* terms, since they admit of quantization in several ways, while gerunds do not share this feature. (We can, for instance, say that someone has *more* wisdom than someone else, but not that he has *more* being wise). There is not space here for a discussion of whether this fact indicates only syntactic and pragmatic differences, or whether it indicates semantic differences between these terms.<sup>22</sup> In any case, the results of this article seem compatible with both possibilities.

Unless, that is, the potential semantic differences so affect the referents of the terms that they are (despite all appearances) *not* coreferential. In fact, such a view has recently been defended.<sup>23</sup> The discussion of this position requires more space than is available here; if it proves correct, the appositive analysis presented here has to be amended to account for

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<sup>22</sup> Wolterstorff (1970: 78) voted for the first option.

<sup>23</sup> Moltmann (2003: 457–461; 2004) argues that gerundives and abstract nouns are not coreferential; Levinson (1978: 10ff., and 1980) once held the analogous position for gerunds and abstract nouns.

it. The present investigation therefore closes with a statement of authorial opinion: doubts about the coreferentiality of corresponding property designators ('being wise', 'wisdom', 'the property of being wise') are not justified. The arguments must be deferred to another occasion.<sup>24</sup>

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