

The Description Theory of Names

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I hereby declare that the dissertation contains no materials accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions of higher education. Also, I declare that the dissertation contains no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical references.

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April 2013

ABSTRACT

My goal in this dissertation is to present and defend a version of Descriptivism that can coherently retain pre-theoretical intuitions about the relationship between proper names and definite descriptions, and successfully answer arguments adduced against it. There are three important claims I believe must be made in order to achieve this. The first is to hold a Cartesian view regarding singular thoughts, that is, to hold that a thought is singular because of its structural features, and not because the subject who entertains it is acquainted with a certain existent. The second is to assert that singular thoughts expressed by the use of a proper name are composed of dynamic senses. There are two consequences of this second claim. The first is that the identity conditions for a singular thought do not entail concept-by-concept identity. The second consequence is that a proper version of Descriptivism must focus on tokens of proper names. The view that answers best to both demands is, I believe, a version of Cluster Descriptivism that is supplemented by the idea that the weights of the descriptions present in a cluster are adjusted according to contextually-available information. The last claim that I shall make is that definite descriptions included in the cluster that gives the meaning of a proper name are two-dimensional singular terms. The claim can be rephrased by saying that the historical connection between “the” and “that” is not mere contingency. As an added bonus, uses of an incomplete definite description are treated similar to those of a proper name: any completion of the description by qualitative material that singles out the intended object is viewed as communicating the same singular thought.

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INTRODUCTION

How do we entertain thoughts about individuals? One intuitive answer is that we store identifying information about them in mental dossiers that may be likened to clusters. There are two claims made here then. The first is that our ability to form thoughts about objects and persons is based on our ability to collect identifying information. The second is that identifying information is organized in a structure where different bits of information reinforce one another and ensure the unity of the cluster. In this view, the ability to understand a language is based on the ability to collect and store identifying information. When we learn the name of an individual, we learn how to associate tokens of the name with identifying information concerning the name's referent. Descriptivism claims that this information may be verbalized by uses of definite descriptions.

As natural as they may seem, the two claims made above are beset by what many take to be insurmountable problems. Let us call what a name contributes to the thought or proposition¹ expressed by an utterance where the name is used "the semantic value of the name." The first problem has to do with the notion that the semantic value of a name must be explained in terms of descriptive identifying information. The standard example which informs the modal argument involves describing a possible situation in which an individual other than the name's referent satisfies the descriptive material associated with the current use of the name. The point is traditionally phrased by saying that names, unlike ordinary definite descriptions, are rigid. Names keep referring to the same individual they were initially assigned to. A description may change its denotation from one circumstance of

¹ Because I view language use as inheriting meaning from the subject's mental activity, I will use "thought" and "proposition" interchangeably. I will use "thought" when underscoring the mental operations of the subject and "proposition" when focusing on language use and linguistic community.

evaluation to another, depending on which individual uniquely satisfies the properties mentioned in the description.²

The second problem stems from the appeal to clusters of identifying information. It is incontrovertible that sometimes a cluster may include information that pertains to an individual different from the name's referent. Error is a fact of life. We commonly revise and adapt our mental files to eliminate it and account for the best available information, yet we do not hold that such changes affect the identity of the name's referent. This entails that any version of Descriptivism must present an account of how the cluster is organized such that including incorrect information does not automatically lead to questions regarding the identity of the name's referent. The point can be rephrased by noting that a name has a stable referent, whereas clusters may differ in their composition. With regard to a specific subject, this demands an explanation of how the subject can use the same name although he associates with it different clusters at different moments in his life. With regard to the linguistic community where the subject acquires the language, this demands an explanation of how two different subject may use the same name, while associating with it widely different mental files.

My aim in this thesis is to defend a version of Descriptivism applied to proper names. Chapter 1 opens with a review of Fregean themes that leads to an examination of Fregean senses and Frege's view that one's thoughts about an individual are sensitive to one's conceptual repertoire. According to an interpretation of Fregean senses, if two subjects associate different information with the name's referent, then they use different names (though syntactically indistinguishable). I will reject this reading and suggest a notion of dynamic senses which is grounded in the assumption that name identity does not require identity of qualitative information associated with its referent. The assumption is at work in

² I will abridge throughout this thesis "definite descriptions" to "descriptions."

cases of learning how to use a name where the participants in the learning game allow that they may acquire distinct information when presented with the name's referent. I will wrap up the chapter with a discussion of Frege's view that concepts are unsaturated entities. Stressing the unsaturated character of concepts can block the complaint that any Descriptivist approach cannot account correctly for the type of intentionality exhibited by a use of a proper name, because Descriptivism would allegedly entail that the subject is thinking about the concepts he associates with the name, as opposed to thinking about the name's referent.

Chapter 2 explores Russell's Theory of Descriptions and finds the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description wanting. I also take up in this chapter an examination of available versions of Descriptivism. I will endorse in this dissertation a version of Cluster Descriptivism supplemented with a contextualist understanding of how weights are adjusted in a cluster and how name tokens are identified. The core idea is that Cluster Descriptivism provides a good explanation of how name tokens function, i.e., in virtue of being associated with descriptions grouped in a cluster and endowed with different weights. However, contextually-available information informs what happens when a cluster undergoes a change and weights must be readjusted. Appearances notwithstanding, mere change in a cluster does not entail that the resulting tokens are not of the same type. I will end up this chapter with a note on similarities between incomplete descriptions and proper names.

Chapter 3 examines Kripke's modal, semantic, and epistemological arguments. While I shall try to show that Descriptivism has enough resources to answer to the semantic and epistemological arguments, it is an open question whether extant answers to the modal argument are successful. Chapter 4 is an assessment of Widescopism, i.e., the view that the descriptions a subject associates with a name must comply with an additional syntactic requirement: whenever the name is embedded in the scope of a modal operator, the

descriptions must be given wide scope relative to the operator. I will review arguments fielded against Widescopism and argue that they do not establish inconclusively its incorrectness. However, I will present two challenges to Widescopism at the end of the chapter and argue that they do require us to consider other versions of Descriptivism.

This will take us to Chapter 5, where I examine Rigidified Descriptivism, i.e., the view that the descriptions included in the cluster have either the form “dthat *F*” or “the actual *F*.” Either option, if correct, ensures that the modal argument does not obtain. I will review criticism fielded against Rigidified Descriptivism and suggest that the most successful version is one in which the descriptions associated with a name are singular terms of the form “dthat *F*,” where empty dthat-terms are allowed to be meaningful.

The last chapter begins with a review of the previous findings. I will then outline a variety of Descriptivism, but I will also make a number of claims that are stronger than those normally presented in the defense of Descriptivism. The modal argument trades on the idea that singular thoughts cannot be conceptual because concepts are repeatable entities. Repeatability entails that individuals other than the name’s referent might have instantiated the concepts present in the mental dossier associated with the referent. Another way to express this intuition is to say that, while entertaining purely conceptual thoughts, the mind is closed to the world. This should not be obviously read in a genetic fashion. We do need to be exposed to an environment in order to acquire concepts. However, once we do so, the kind of activity that the mind engages in is not essentially open to the environment that nurtured concept acquisition. In contrast, mental processes that are expressible by uses of proper names are essentially connected to, dependent on, and open to the world. The sort of process that a subject is engaged in when visually tracking an object moving in front of him is fundamentally dependent on the fact that the perceived object exists.

I will reject this view and argue that there are cases in which deploying conceptual resources is a process essentially open to the world. This happens in two ways. First, because we deploy unsaturated entities (concepts) in tracking an individual, we are essentially oriented towards that which would make the singular thought true. The absence of the intentional object from the thought expressed and the necessity to always consider a domain (a world) which would include it is the first way in which our singular thoughts are open to the world. Secondly, I will argue that in entertaining a singular thought, the mind is open to a specific environment, i.e., the environment where the subject is currently located and to which the concepts are to be applied to. To recast this statement in a semantic fashion, I will say that definite descriptions on certain positions are two-dimensional terms. When Henry says “The friend that I met two years ago at a New Year’s party reads philosophy,” he refers to the actual individual who satisfies these properties. Rigidified Descriptivism is, therefore, correct, but in a more dramatic fashion: a sentence of the form “The *F* is *G*,” where the description is meant to denote a specific individual, says that that *F* is *G*. I will wrap up the dissertation by reviewing and rejecting arguments fielded against the view that definite descriptions are referring expressions. Among them, I will reject the proposal that acquaintance is a necessary condition for having a singular thought. I will defend a Cartesian view that defines singular thoughts in terms of their “architecture,” that is, in virtue of their structural characteristics.

CHAPTER 1 – FREGE

1.1 FUNCTION AND ARGUMENT

Analyzing a theory may turn out to be a hopelessly arduous endeavor if we do not see clearly what it was meant to achieve. To understand the goal that the battery of arguments and concepts was meant to attain is to grasp that which the philosopher held to be of uttermost value to our knowledge. Unveiling this axiomatic bias may be helpful in resolving apparent contradictions among various excerpts of his work or in comprehending why at times he did not want to take the easy way out by foregoing one of his tenets, but chose instead to run headlong into conceptual tensions and risk the very system that he so painstakingly built.

It may, therefore, come to one as a surprise to learn that Frege was initially interested only in mathematics. It may seem remarkable because the legacy that Frege left to logic can only be described as momentous – and this is not a liberal use of the word. Frege wanted to find stable foundations for mathematics and, in the process of seeking them, he fundamentally transformed logic and sketched the analytic program of deploying logical notions in order to advance a systematic explanation of natural language. The view of logic that we inherited from Frege may now appear to many of us entirely banal, yet we should try to be able to understand anew how far-reaching the impact of Frege's ideas was.

Frege felt that mathematics had increasingly become threatened during the nineteenth century by a lack of clarity both with regard to its method and its subject matter. The standard of valid inference had been taken for a long time to be Euclidean geometry and its axiomatic method. Yet the nineteenth century saw the birth of non-Euclidean geometries, whose common rejection of the axiom that parallel lines do not meet produced coherent and useful systems. Self-evidence, the property that was held to characterize true axioms, was put to a

test. Explaining self-evidence on the basis of our beliefs about the truth of the axioms was a non-starter for many, including Frege, who did not want to base mathematics on opinions that may be contingent and subjective. The difficulty in defining what is self-evident was exacerbated by the discovery of a number of paradoxes and antinomies that proceeded from what seemed to be completely innocuous assumptions. Cantor showed that the set of natural numbers has the same cardinality (the same number of members) as some of its proper subsets. For instance, the set of natural numbers and the set of even natural number have the same cardinality. Yet this may seem unintuitive. In any finite set of natural numbers, there are fewer even numbers than the members of the finite set. Cantor would have us believe that, when we move from finite to infinite sets, this result does hold any longer. Frege took these results to show that, in any axiomatic system, we have to identify clearly the axioms, try to reduce their number to a minimum by deriving everything that can be derived, and define in advance all acceptable modes of inference. Frege, thus, turned his attention to the study of logic as the science of valid inferences.

However, aside from the uncertainty that surrounded what counts as an acceptable inference, mathematics dealt with what Frege thought is a lack of precision regarding the subject matter of this science itself: the number. Why are imaginary numbers, complex numbers, infinite number, and natural number all numbers? If Cantor speaks about infinite numbers because he assumes a notion of number different from that of another mathematician, then it should turn out that their two systems are different because the concepts they use cannot be unified by a common definition. Without giving a definite answer to the question “What is a number?” mathematics cannot hope to be a rigorous science. “[I]f a concept fundamental to a mighty science gives rise to difficulties, then it is surely an imperative task to investigate it more closely until these difficulties are overcome.”³

³ Frege, “The Foundations of Arithmetic,” 136.

Whereas questions about what counts as sound axiomatic system made Frege undertake a study of valid modes of inference, the profligacy of types of number led him to embark on a conceptual analysis of the object of mathematical study. Conceptual analysis, made with the purpose of uncovering logical forms, is the legacy that Frege left to analytic philosophy.

Frege saw the study of valid inferences foundational for his logicist project, which seeks to determine “how far one could get in arithmetic by means of logical deductions alone, supported only by the laws of thought.”⁴ But the first problem he faced in advancing this project was that Aristotelian logic seemed too blunt an instrument to use in order to reform the foundations of mathematics. Categorical or syllogistic logic acknowledges only four basic types of proposition:

All *S* are *P*.

No *S* is *P*.

Some *S* are *P*.

Some *S* are not *P*.

The expressive powers of this logic are first limited by the fact that it cannot properly model sentences which contain more than one quantifier. Thus, the sentence

All girls like their friends more than their brothers.

can only be modeled in categorical logic as

All *S* are *P*,

⁴ Frege, “Conceptual Notation,” 93.

that is,

All girls are persons who like their friends more than their brothers.

Yet, intuitively, the initial sentence is about three types of objects, girls, friends, and brothers, while the resulting logical modeling shows it to be only about all girls.

Moreover, the fragment “their brothers” induces a kind of ambiguity that is not properly represented in Aristotelian logic. The sentence can mean

All girls like their friends more than they like their own brothers.

or

All girls like their friends more than they like the brothers of their friends.

In both cases, categorical logic will predict that the two resulting sentences have the same structure, that is, *All S are P*. But then again there are important differences between the two forms that are not captured by the Aristotelian rendition. In the first sentence, the hapless brothers are siblings to the girls, whereas, in the second sentence, the brothers are related to the friends of the girls. Classical logic cannot exhibit this difference because it symbolizes as *P* both the phrase “persons who like their friends more than their own brothers” and the phrase “persons who like their friends more than the brothers of their friends.”

This could still make one think that refining Aristotelian logic might hold the key to expressing all these subtle differences. But Frege thought that classical logic has to be abandoned altogether, not only because it is not expressive enough, but because it attributes

the same logical form to what are indeed extremely different propositions. We can understand this radical decision if we consider for a moment the way in which syllogistic logic treats propositions about particular objects. A sentence such as “Henry is reading philosophy” can only be modeled in Aristotelian logic as saying that all things that are identical to Henry are things that read philosophy.

We cannot force this sentence into the mold of “Some S are P ” because the truth of “Some things that are identical to Henry are things that read philosophy” is consistent with that of “Some things that are identical to Henry are not things that read philosophy.” The simultaneous truth of “Some mammals are rational” and “Some mammals are not rational” expresses the fact that the class of mammals can be divided into a part that is comprised of rational beings and one that is comprised of creatures deprived of reason. But what could be the meaning of the fact that, among the things identical to Henry, some read and some do not read philosophy?

Statements about particular objects, which express what we will call singular propositions, can only be modeled by Aristotelian logic as general propositions, i.e., as propositions of the type that all S are P . The problem is that the truth of a general proposition such as “All S are P ” does not appear to depend on the existence of things that are S . To give an example, a statement such as “All liberal democracies hold elections at regular intervals” does not imply that there are liberal democracies. The sentence would still be true if our world fell into a wretched state of lawlessness. It would still be true because what it says is that there is a connection between being a liberal democracy and regularly organizing elections and this connection would hold even in a world ruled by dictators.

In contrast, the sentence “Henry is reading philosophy” cannot be true if Henry does not exist. If it turned out that what the subject calls “Henry” is only a figment of his imagination, we may want to count the utterance as false or as meaningless, but obviously its

truth would be out of the question. This observation only underscores the difference between the truth conditions of general and singular propositions. When one says “Henry is reading philosophy,” one means to speak about a particular person and attribute to him the property of reading philosophy. Yet when one states that all democracies organize regularly elections, one does not want to talk about anything in particular. The contrast is completely lost in Aristotelian logic.

These difficulties convinced Frege that classical logic and its central distinction between subject and predicate have to be abandoned altogether. His innovation was to replace the distinction with that between function and argument, although one should be warned beforehand that the two distinctions are not perfectly congruous. A function is a type of relation that takes members of a domain as arguments and outputs a certain value for each assignment of arguments. Adding 1 to any natural number is an example of a function that has the set of natural numbers both as domain and value range. It is a function of one argument, on a par with subtracting 2 from any natural number or multiplying each natural number by 3. We normally mark the argument places by writing variables, as in $x+y$, but we should not interpret the variables as names for variable numbers.⁵ All numbers are determinate, so it would be better to represent the function addition as $(\)+(\)$, where the gaps indicate where the arguments must be plugged in.

In Frege’s terminology, the characteristic nature of a function is to be unsaturated, that is, to contain gaps that have to be filled by objects. Frege’s suggestion, which turned out to have far-reaching consequences, is that the distinction between function and argument can be central in the development of a new type of logic. Concepts can be defined as functions from objects to truth-values. When an object is associated by a concept with truth, Frege says

⁵ Frege, “What is a Function?,” 194.

that the object “falls under” the concept.⁶ For example, the concept of redness is a certain function that takes as argument any object that can be colored and outputs a truth-value, depending on whether the object is red or not. To speak about redness, then, is to speak about a certain pattern that obtains between objects and truth or falsity.

Frege realized that the application of the fundamental distinction between function and argument can be extended to logical constants. The logical constant “and” can be defined as a truth-function “() and ()” from truth-values to truth-values that outputs truth only if both values are the truth. Negation can be viewed as another truth-function that outputs falsehood, if the value is truth, and truth, if the value is falsehood. More interestingly, quantifiers such as “every” and “some” can be viewed as functions from concepts to truth-values or as second-level concepts. The universal quantifier “every” in “Every *F* is *G*” is a function of the form “Every () is ()” that takes the concepts *F* and *G* as values and outputs truth only if everything that falls under the first concept also falls under the second concept as well. The universal quantifier “every” in “Everything is *F*” is a function that takes *F* as value and outputs truth if, in turn, *F* outputs truth for all values in its associated domain.

The interpretation Frege gives to the existential quantifier “there is” in the sentence “There is at least something that is *S* and *P*” is that of a function of two places that takes the concepts *S* and *P* as arguments and outputs truth if at least one thing that falls under *S* also

⁶ It is fundamental for Frege’s purposes that there be an absolute real distinction between object and concept. Yet Benno Kerry noted that statements about concepts call the truth of this claim into question. For instance, in the sentence “The concept *horse* is a concept easily attained” the phrase “the concept *horse*” should designate, according to Frege, an object, and not a concept, which is intuitively incorrect. Kerry thought that the distinction between concept and object is relative in the same way in which that between father and son is (one can be both father and son, although obviously not of the same person). In answering this charge, Frege would stonewall and state that the first three words refer to an object (Frege, “On Concept and Object,” 166-167), but this reply only postpones the problem. For now, it appears that a statement about a concept can *never* be true, because an object, such as the one allegedly referred to by “the concept *horse*”, can never fall under the second-level *being a concept easily attained*. As Frege himself acknowledged, “the word ‘concept’ itself is, taken strictly, already defective, since the phrase ‘is a concept’ requires a proper name as grammatical subject; and so, strictly speaking, it requires something contradictory, since no proper name can designate a concept; or perhaps better still, something nonsensical” (Frege, *Posthumous Writings*, 177-8.) Frege went on to attribute this issue to an imprecision of natural language and entreated the reader to meet him halfway (Frege, “On Concept and Object,” 173), but it is an open question whether this drawback stems from an imperfection of the medium in which we attempt to communicate the idea that concepts, unlike objects, are unsaturated or whether it shows a flaw in Frege’s own analysis.

falls under P . The existential quantifier used in the sentence “There are mermaids” is a function that takes as value the concept *mermaid* and outputs as value truth if and only something falls under the concept *mermaid*. The upshot of this definition of quantifiers is that to say that mammals exist is not to make a claim similar to saying that something is red. To say that a thing is red is to employ a first-level concept, that is, a function from objects to truth-values. To say, in turn, that mammals exist is to say that the first-level concept *mermaid* has a non-empty extension, i.e., there is at least one thing that falls under this concept.

A universal or existential statement can be represented by using one or more variables bound by the universal or existential quantifiers. “All S are P ” is represented as stating that for every x , if x is S , then x is P , “Some S is P ” is represented as saying that there is at least one thing x that is both S and P , while “Henry is reading philosophy” is to be formalized as P_H , which is the attribution of the property of reading philosophy to the individual Henry.

Every quantifier has a given scope. In the sentence

There is an x that is F and, for every y , if y is G , then x is in relation R with y .

the scope of the universal quantifier is “if y is G , then x is in relation R with y ,” whereas the scope of the existential quantifier is the entire sentence.

The sentence “All girls like their friends more than they like their brothers” can be clarified as saying that all girls like their friends more than they like their own brothers, that is, that

For every x , y , and z , if x is a girl, y is the friend of x , and z is the brother of x , then x likes y more than z

or that all girls like their friends more than they like the brothers of their friends, that is

For every x , y , and z , if x is a girl, y is the friend of x , and z is the brother of y , then x likes y more than z .

Language is thus supposed to function as follows. Names refer to objects. Predicates refer to concepts, which are functions from object to the truth-values Truth and False. Objects, the referents of names, are the arguments for concepts. Quantifiers are second-level concepts, i.e., functions from concepts to Truth or False.

The fundamental semantic unit is the sentence, through which we express a thought, i.e., “something for which the question of truth or falsity arises.”⁷ The focus on sentences and the thoughts they express was meant to alleviate a certain instinct to focus on the meaning of words in isolation, which Frege thought is the first sign of bad methodology. Studying the meaning of a word on its own may lead one to the quest of finding a certain entity that can support the use of the word in one’s language. Psychologism recasts this investigation in the form of a project to discover the psychological entity that is associated with the word in the mind of the speaker. Frege was bitterly opposed to psychologism, which he saw as a distortion of the point that meaning is objective. His dislike was buttressed by the study of the foundations of mathematics. Frege conceived mathematics as a rigorous science, whose claims to truth are based on the objectivity of its subject matter. Mathematical theorems are neither the result of empirical generalizations, as Mill held, nor the mere formal study of signs, as formalism would have us believe. Frege thought that mathematics is the study of real, objective entities, and that mathematical theorems are true because they accurately depict these abstract entities. There could not have been anything more alien to Frege’s

⁷ Frege, “The Thought,” 203.

understanding of mathematics than an approach like psychologism, which would ground mathematical truths in subjective and contingent notions, or ideas, as Frege calls them.

The antidote to looking for a subjective image that explains the semantic properties of a word is to consider the functioning of the word in a sentence. The sentence is the vehicle for expressing a thought and thus making a claim that can be true or false. Since truth and falsity are objective notions, an explanation of the meaning of the word as embedded in the sentence would force us to move away from the subject's conception of what the word means and look for the objective contribution of the meaning of the word to the thought expressed by the sentence. But looking at the different roles that words have in various sentences precipitates the distinction between function and argument, which, recast at the level of a sentence, generates the distinction between concept and object. It is this chain of ideas that made Frege express his unconditional support in the Introduction to *The Foundations of Arithmetic* for

“three fundamental principles:

- always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective;
- never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition;
- never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.”⁸

1.2 A PUZZLE ABOUT COGNITIVE VALUE

Frege intended to propound in *Conceptual Notation* an artificial language in which all proofs could be examined with the greatest clarity and all steps necessary in the derivation of a conclusion could be expressed. Its reader will have noticed that, after introducing the conditional and negation strokes and defining conjunction and disjunction on their basis, Frege turns briefly to remarking on the status of the identity sign. This may create the wrong

⁸ Frege, “The Foundations of Arithmetic,” 140.

impression that Frege speaks about the identity sign as if it had a role similar to logical connectives.

The identity sign may be said to live a double life. On the one hand, true identity statements license substitutivity *salva veritate*. To say that 2 is identical to the sum of 1 and 1 allows one to infer from the truth of the statement that 2 is a natural number the truth of the corresponding statement that the sum of 1 and 1 is also a natural number. In this respect, the identity sign appears to play a role associated with logical constants, such as the conditional, because it allows us to move within a theory from one set of premises to another. On the other hand, the identity sign is used sometimes to express new knowledge, when it is flanked by two different names. To say that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens is informative. Note that informativeness does not hinge on the truth of the statement. One could wrongly state that Mark Twain is Henry James and the information he would thus convey would still appear as new.⁹ Identity, as a relation, is set apart from all other predicate letters because it receives a constant interpretation in any model. If one interprets predicate letters by assigning sets of objects to them, then the identity sign is always assigned the same set of objects, namely, the set of ordered pairs whose members belong to the domain of interpretation such that the first member is the same as the second.

The advantage of Frege's notation is that it makes clear that he does not interpret identity as a logical constant.¹⁰ The vocabulary of *Conceptual Notation* can be divided into two subsets: strokes and symbols. Strokes can be assimilated to a certain extent to the class of logical constants. I say "to a certain extent", because not all strokes would be recognized by a logician today as logical signs. For instance, Frege defines the horizontal stroke ("the content stroke") as the sign for joining notions into a propositional whole, and the vertical stroke ("the judgment stroke") as the sign for asserting the whole thus expressed. In his notation,

⁹ One obvious exception is the case of names that are introduced to one as co-referential, as in "Meet John, aka Shorty".

¹⁰ May, "Frege on Identity Statements," 7.

—— Opposite magnetic poles attract each other

can be glossed over as “The circumstance that opposite magnetic poles attract each other” or “The proposition that magnetic poles attract each other,” signaling that the import of the horizontal stroke is to connect the above mentioned notions, while the subject withholds assent or denial regarding its truth.¹¹ The notation

|—— Opposite magnetic poles attract each other

serves the purpose of putting forth the judgment that opposite magnetic poles attract each other. Except for these two strokes, all other strokes identified by Frege are what we now recognize as logic constants.

Unlike strokes, symbols are signs whose interpretation is given in terms of their designation. A stroke is interpreted by showing what kind of logical form it demarcates. A symbol is interpreted by assigning to it an object or a concept, depending on whether we deal with singular terms or with predicates. This division enables us to see that Frege did not define identity as a logical constant, because he did not assign to it a stroke, nor did he attempt to define it in terms of other strokes.

Frege realized that there is an ambiguity in using the identity sign, in that it can both license substitutivity and sometimes convey novel information. His resolution in *Conceptual Notation* was to argue that, although ordinarily a name is used to designate its referent, in an identity statement, the name refers to itself.

Identity of content differs from conditionality and negation by relating to names, not to contents. Although symbols are usually only representative of their contents – so that each combination [of symbols usually] expresses only a relation between

¹¹ Frege, “Conceptual Notation,” 97-98.

their contents – they at once appear *in propria persona* as soon as they are combined by the symbol for identity of content, for this signifies the circumstance that the two names have the same content. Thus, with the introduction of a symbol of identity of content, the bifurcation is necessarily introduced into the meaning of every symbol, the same symbols standing at times for their contents, at times for themselves.¹²

Consider the example of the true identity statement that the Morning Star is identical to the Evening Star. As it turns out, both phrases designate the same astronomical object, the planet Venus. Frege would have us believe that, in stating the above identity, we are in fact saying that the singular terms “the Morning Star” and “the Evening Star” have the same content. But since singular terms are interpreted by being assigned contents, it would appear that the identity statement is about words, not objects, and its purport is to comment on how we use the language.

This gives the impression, at first, that what we are dealing with pertains merely to the *expression* and *not to the thought*, and that we have absolutely no need for different symbols of the same content, and thus no [need for a] symbol for identity of content either.¹³

Yet Frege would argue that each singular term is associated with a distinct *mode of determination* of the referent. We can suppose that the modes of determination are partly exhibited by the linguistic make-up of the phrases “the Morning Star” and “the Evening Star.” Then what an identity statement between different singular terms says is that “*the same content*, in a particular case, is actually given by *two {different} modes of determination*.”¹⁴

The explanation of the symbol standing for identity of content is, thus,

let $\mid \text{---} (A \equiv B)$
 mean: *the symbol **A** and the symbol **B** have the same conceptual content, so that we can always replace **A** by **B** and vice versa.*¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 108.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵ Ibid.

We should pause to make one remark about this definition. Frege is still resolutely pursuing a referentialist semantics that assigns objects to singular terms and concepts to predicates. Modes of determination are brought into play to explain the need for different co-referential names. Distinct names correspond to distinct modes of determination. However, modes of determination are not part of the content of an identity statement. An utterance of “The Evening Star is the Morning Star” expresses only the judgment that the two symbols have the same content (referent).

The metalinguistic explanation is surely unstable. In Frege’s conceptual notation, symbols are interpreted signs whose identity supervenes on that of their content. If two symbols designate different contents, they cannot be identical. What is the legitimate role that modes of determination play in a semantic theory, then? Frege says that to different names correspond different modes of determination. Yet such modes cannot be allowed to have semantic import. Why not brush aside modes of determination, along with other psychological notions, such as ideas, impressions, or subjective associations among concepts? What kind of semantic, and not merely psychological, import are modes of determination meant to have?

Frege would come to doubt in time the veracity of the metalinguistic approach. In *Function and Concept*, an essay that he explicitly presents as an elucidation of some ideas expressed in *The Conceptual Notation*, he denies that identity of reference implies identity of the information expressed.

If we say ‘the Evening Star is a planet with a shorter period of revolution than the Earth’, the thought we express is other than in the sentence ‘the Morning Star is a planet with a shorter period of revolution than the Earth’; for somebody who does [not] know that the Morning Star is the Evening Star might regard one as true and the other as false.¹⁶

¹⁶ Frege, “Function and Concept,” 150.

Frege assumed that the phrases ‘the Evening Star’ and ‘the Morning Star’ can be analyzed as proper names, an idea which would be famously rejected later by Russell. Indeed, Frege thought that any linguistic entity that designates an object in the broadest sense of the term is a proper name.

It is clear from the context that by ‘sign’ or ‘name’ I have here understood any designation representing a proper name, which thus has as its reference a definite object (the word taken in the widest range), but not a concept or a relation, which shall be discussed further in another article. The designation of a single object can also consist of several words or other signs. For brevity, let every such designation be called a proper name.¹⁷

If the phrases “the Evening Star” and “the Morning Star” are proper names, in the sense explained above, then their conceptual content is identical to the object they are assigned. Since it is factually true that the two phrases co-designate, it should follow that there is no distinction in the information expressed between the following two sentences:

The Evening Star is a planet with a shorter period of revolution than the Earth.

and

The Morning Star is a planet with a shorter period of revolution than the Earth.

More generally, substituting one of the two phrases for the other in any sentence should lead to a sentence whose informational content is identical to the content of the original sentence. But clearly that is not true. A subject ignorant of the factual identity of the Evening Star and the Morning Star might acquiesce in the truth of the former sentence, while

¹⁷ Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 176.

rejecting the truth of the latter. If the thought expressed is identical in both cases, this would be a case of irrationality.

Frege might appear to have simply restated the case against the identification of conceptual content with the object designated, but the first quote from *Function and Concept* is more than just mere rehearsal. The two sentences under consideration are not identity statements of the sort considered in the *Conceptual Notation*. Frege was initially willing to accept that the content of a proper name is the object designated and wanted to bring into play the metalinguistic approach for the special class of sentences expressing identities. Yet the quote from *Function and Concept* makes it clear that Frege denies referentialism about proper names with respect to *any* sentence. He has to explain, therefore, what the new semantic theory is and how we should understand the comment that the two sentences express different thoughts.

At any rate, the metalinguistic analysis gives only an incomplete explanation of how the identity sign constrains the semantic value of the expressions flanking it. It says that, when the expressions flanking it are proper names, then the identity sentence expresses the proposition that the two names are co-referential. But how can we extend this analysis to the case of variables?¹⁸ In the formula $(\forall x)(x=0 \supset Fx)$ the variable appears both as an argument of the identity sign and as the argument of ' $F\xi$ '.¹⁹ But the two occurrences place incompatible constraints on the variable range. The first occurrence indicates that the variable ranges over expressions, because only linguistic entities can be quoted, whereas the second occurrence implies that the variable actually ranges over objects. Note that the fact that both occurrences

¹⁸ Heck, Jr., "Frege on Identity and Identity-Statements," 87. Indeed, Heck thinks that the reason why Frege abandoned the metalinguistic view is because it could not make sense of how variables embed in identity statements. I believe the reason may have more with the fact that a metalinguistic analysis moves the focus of the mathematical inquiry away from numbers to numerals, i.e., it makes the meaningfulness of some signs depend on how we handle them, and not on what they designate. This sort of conception is not radically different from formalism in mathematics and Frege wanted to avoid any possible point of convergence with this theory.

¹⁹ ' ξ ' indicates the argument-place.

are bound by the same quantifier makes impossible a reply that appeals to ambiguity. One could, indeed, hold that in the sentence “If Hesperus is Phosphorus, then Hesperus is a planet” what is communicated is that if “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” have the same reference, then Hesperus is a planet. This would be tantamount to saying that in the original sentence, “Hesperus” was used ambiguously as a name of a name and as a name of an object. But this leeway seems absent in the case of the sentence where a variable appears both on the side of the identity sign and as an argument of the concept-expression.²⁰

On Sense and Reference is Frege’s answer to the perceived failure of the metalinguistic approach. He begins the article by revisiting the question of whether identity is a relation between objects or one between names. He goes on through exactly the same arguments that he canvassed in *Conceptual Notation*, only to conclude in contrast to the position he previously held, that identity is, in fact, a relation between objects. The idea that identity is merely a relation between names is challenged by the fact that the sentences $a=a$ and $a=b$ have different cognitive values. One is analytic, whereas the other is synthetic. Frege inferred from this in *Conceptual Notation* that identity is a relation between names. However, if that were true, then an identity sentence “would no longer refer to the subject matter, but only to its mode of designation,”²¹ i.e., it would not pertain to an object, but to how we speak about it. Yet this would make the knowledge that we so gain in finding out that $a=b$ merely about words, i.e., “we would express no proper knowledge by its means,”²² whereas our intent was to make an assertion about the object, not about our way of speaking about it. So identity is, after all, a relation between objects. In coming to learn what is communicated by an identity statement, the subject does not learn what is depicted by the utterance, namely, that the object is self-identical, but the thought expressed via such an utterance.

²⁰ Unless we apply Kaplan’s method of consolidation as outlined in Kaplan, “Opacity,” 242-243.

²¹ Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 175.

²² Ibid.

The fact that Frege opens *On Sense and Reference* with an inquiry about the difference between identity sentences may make it look as if his focus is on what identity sentences express. Thau and Caplan pursue this line of interpretation, when arguing that Frege has never abandoned the metalinguistic view: “*the problem about cognitive value he considers in the closing paragraph and the problem about identity discussed in the opening paragraph are not the same problem.*”²³

But this is a very unlikely interpretation. Frege moves immediately from inquiring about the nature of identity to remarking that the sentences $a=a$ and $a=b$ have different cognitive values. Moreover, his initial appeal to senses in *Function and Concept* is premised on the fact that the following two sentences are informative in different ways:

The Morning Star is a planet with a shorter period of revolution than the Earth.

The Evening Star is a planet with a shorter period of revolution than the Earth.²⁴

Since they do not predicate identity, it should follow that Frege did not find them puzzling, in the same way in which he did find baffling the behavior of identity sentences. And yet it is rather plain that Frege thinks that there is one root problem apparent in both types of case. What he came to realize is that words do more than merely designate: they also express senses. Frege’s puzzle is, thus, not about the identity sign, but about the reason why substituting words that have the same semantic value leads to the formation of a sentence whose cognitive value is different from that of the original sentence.

Frege’s puzzle can be exposed by noting that it is inconsistent to hold at the same time that

²³ Thau and Caplan, “What’s Puzzling Gottlob Frege?” 52.

²⁴ Heck, Jr., “Frege on Identity and Identity-Statements,” 88.

1. The semantic value of a proper name is its referent.
2. (Compositionality) The semantic value of an utterance is a function of the semantic values of its constituent expressions.
3. The cognitive value of an utterance is a function of the content it expresses (if the same content is grasped in two utterances, then they have the same cognitive value).
4. Utterances of such sentences as “Hesperus is Phosphorus” and “Hesperus is Hesperus” do not have the same cognitive value (the former is informative, whereas the latter is not).

If “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” have as a matter of fact the same semantic value (the planet Venus), then, via compositionality, the semantic value of the sentence “Hesperus is identical to Hesperus” is the same as that of the sentence “Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus.” But if the subject grasps the same thing twice, then the two utterances should not appear to him as cognitively different. The reason why I included premise 3 in the argument is because, understood simply as a conjunction of the other premises, the inference only shows that cognitive value is an aspect of one’s mental life which is different from linguistic meaning. In other words, without premise 3, it is open to one to hold that a subject grasps the same proposition twice, upon hearing “Hesperus is identical to Hesperus” and “Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus,” while holding that the senses associated with the two names are relevant only to a psychological explanation of how the subject uses the words.²⁵ Yet it is clear that Frege wants to infer a semantic conclusion from the fact that two sentences

²⁵ Dummett, “Frege’s Distinction between Sense and Reference,” 130.

have different cognitive values and it is plain again that he wants to make the case that their semantic values are different.²⁶

1.3 SENSE AND REFERENCE

The names “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” have different senses, which contain different modes of presentation of the same object.²⁷ Fregean senses are meant to play minimally five functions:

1. Senses are meanings of words. The sense of a sentence is a thought, which is the result of compounding the senses of the constituent phrases. A phrase designates its reference, by expressing a sense. A sentence names a truth value (the True or the False), by expressing a thought, that is “something for which the question of truth arises.”²⁸ Thoughts are both truth bearers and that which we grasp in understanding an utterance.

²⁶ Frege’s answer can be criticized by denying that a difference in sense leads to a difference in thought. One type of theory states that, contrary to our intuition, one who believes that Hesperus is beautiful also believes that Phosphorus is beautiful. This approach insists that beliefs reported by using sentences containing proper names relate the subject only to singular propositions (this type of naïve Russellianism has been endorsed for instance by Braun, “Understanding belief reports,” Richard, “Direct reference and ascriptions of belief,” Salmon, *Frege’s Puzzle*, “Illogical belief,” and “Being of two minds: Belief with doubt,” and Soames, “Direct reference, propositional attitudes and semantic content” and “Beyond singular propositions”). It tries to explain the appearance of the fact that the two sentences express different contents by claiming that the information they implicate pragmatically is different and that speakers confuse this information with semantic content. See, e.g., Tye, “The Puzzle of Hesperus and Phosphorus.” His analysis is repudiated by Yagisawa, “A Semantic Solution to Frege’s Puzzle,” where Yagisawa argues that a careful Millian should view “Hesperus is identical to Hesperus” as being informative on the grounds that there is no *semantic* rule that stipulates that all occurrences of a name (syntactically individuated) should be co-referential. See also Tienson, “Hesperus and Phosphorus,” for a criticism of this strategy based on an analysis of knowledge ascriptions. Another way of blocking Frege’s argument is to say that a difference in sense *sometimes* leads to a difference in thought (e.g., Richard, *Propositional Attitudes* and “Attitudes in Context”; the general idea is that the truth of belief reports depends on contextual communicational interests). Finally, Frege’s puzzle can be rejected by stating that belief is a triadic relation between a subject, a proposition, and unarticulated constituents that reflect how the subject grasps the propositional constituents (e.g., Crimmins and Perry “The Prince and the Phone Booth” and Crimmins, *Talk about Beliefs*). Prior versions were offered by Schiffer, “Naming and Knowing” and Loar, “Reference and Propositional Attitudes”. For criticism, see Stanley, “Context and Logical Form” and “Making It Articulated”.

²⁷ Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 176.

²⁸ Frege, “The Thought,” 203. Frege believed that truth is a primitive property of thoughts and criticized the correspondence theory of truth, arguing that “[i]t would only be possible to compare an idea to a thing if the

2. Sense determines reference (the converse is not true). “The regular connexion between a sign, its sense, and its reference is of such a kind that to the sign there corresponds a definite sense and to that in turn a definite reference, while to a given reference (an object) there does not belong only a single sign.”²⁹
 3. Senses can be expressed in different languages or by different words in the same language. “The same sense has different expressions in different languages or even in the same language.”³⁰
 4. The sense of an expression encapsulates its cognitive significance, what one cognizes upon understanding the expression.³¹ As part of a thought, a sense is what explains Frege’s intuitive criterion of difference:³² if a subject can coherently take different attitudes towards two sentences, while understanding them, then the two sentences express different thoughts.³³
 5. Senses are denoted by the phrases that express them in oblique contexts.³⁴
- Consider the sentence “Henry believes that Hesperus is a planet.” Frege argued that in opaque contexts, such as quotation or attitudinal contexts³⁵, a phrase does not designate its customary reference, but acquires an indirect one.³⁶ He went on

thing were an idea too.” See Heck and May, “Frege’s Contribution to the Philosophy of Language,” 19: “judging that *p* is attempting to refer, by thinking that *p*, to the True.”

²⁹ Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 176.

³⁰ Frege, *ibid.*

³¹ See Perry, “Cognitive Significance,” 6. Perry also endorses a directly referential approach to the proposition expressed by an utterance, and identifies the cognitive significance of the utterance with the proposition that the truth conditions of the utterance are satisfied.

³² Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 18.

³³ Taschek in “Frege’s Puzzle” argues that the puzzle shows how two sentences with the same informational content can diverge in logical potential. He rejects the suggestion that Frege wanted to show that the sentences $a=a$ and $a=b$ encode different pieces of information and argues that Frege was only committed to showing that the two sentences vary in cognitive potential (784). However, he does not clarify in what respect one who learns that $a=b$, while knowing that a is *F*, comes to acquire knowledge by inferring that b is *F*. If the informational content of the two sentences is identical, that is if a , i.e., b , is *F*, then one does not end up learning anything new by agreeing that b is *F*. It is difficult to see how these cases can be viewed as “valuable extensions of our knowledge.”

³⁴ Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 177. See also Burge, “Belief *De Re*,” 356.

³⁵ That is, contexts where an attitude towards a proposition is reported, e.g., “*S* believes that *p*” or “*S* denies that *q*.”

³⁶ Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 182.

to identify the indirect reference with the customary sense and we can understand why he reasoned so, if we consider the above belief report. If one is of the view that beliefs are mental states, then one can clarify this by saying that the report describes Henry as being in a belief relation with a mental item. This mental entity is the thought that is ordinarily expressed by Henry when uttering “Hesperus is a planet.” Henry enters into a belief relation with this thought, which in turn is the result of aggregating the senses of the words “Hesperus” and “planet.” Thus, “Hesperus” does not refer to the planet Venus in the belief report, but to Henry’s sense of the word, while expressing another sense of Henry’s sense of “Hesperus.”³⁷

Frege was not explicit about the manner in which senses should be defined and a fair amount of philosophical exertion would be applied to solving this question. Frege did link, though, the sense of a sign to the mode of presentation of the referent of the sign. He takes as an example the expressions “the point of intersection of a and b ” and “the point of intersection of b and c ,” where a , b , and c are the lines connecting the vertices of a triangle to the midpoints of the opposing sides. The two expressions indicate two modes of presentation of what turns out to be the same point. Thus, he says,

³⁷ As Benson Mates pointed out in “Synonymity,” iterating propositional attitudes creates a problem for the idea that senses of synonymous words can be substituted across oblique contexts (the argument was aimed at Carnap’s interpretation based on the notion of intensional isomorphism). One possibility to reject this conclusion is to deny that one can have different attitudes towards sentences obtained by substitution of synonyms (in contrast, Rieber in “Understanding Synonyms” argues, to the contrary, that a subject can understand two synonyms, but, given skepticism about his command of his own language, come to doubt whether they have the same meaning). For instance, Church in “Intensional Isomorphism” argued that, since translation preserves meaning, one cannot consistently take opposing attitudes towards two sentences, one of which is obtained from the other by substitution of synonyms. The translation test was initially proposed by C.H. Langford in his review of E.W. Beth’s “The Significance of Pasigraphic Systems,” 53. However, as Salmon noted (“A Problem in the Frege-Church Theory”), this result conflicts with Church’s own resolution of the Paradox of Analysis. See Moore’s “The Refutation of Idealism,” 442, for a formulation of the paradox. Dummett notes in “Frege and the Paradox of Analysis” that the Paradox of Analysis had already been formulated by Husserl in his review of Frege’s “Foundations of Arithmetic.” A second strategy is to deny compositionality. See for an example Putnam, “Synonymity”. Kit Fine’s *Semantic Relationism* also outlines a direct reference approach for names that renounces the standard version of compositionality.

It is natural, now, to think of there being connected with a sign (name, combination of words, letter), besides that to which the sign refers, which may be called the reference of the sign, also what I should like to call the *sense* of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained.... [T]he reference of the expressions ‘the point of intersection of *a* and *b*’ and ‘the point of intersection of *b* and *c*’ would be the same, but not their name. The reference of ‘evening star’ would be the same as that of ‘morning star’, but not the sense.³⁸

A sense retains at the cognitive level one aspect of the referent. “The sense of a proper name is grasped by everybody who is sufficiently familiar with the language or the totality of designations to which it belongs; but this serves to illuminate only a single aspect of the reference, supposing it to have one.”³⁹ It follows that a difference between senses can only be explained by a difference between the modes of presentation they encapsulate.

But how fine-grained should senses be? In a footnote to the passage I have just quoted, Frege adds

In the case of an actual proper name such as ‘Aristotle’ opinions as to the sense may differ. It might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. Anybody who does this will attach another sense to the sentence ‘Aristotle was born in Stagira’ than will a man who takes as the sense of the name: the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira. So long as the reference remains the same, such variations of sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science and ought not to occur in a perfect language.⁴⁰

Expressions are individuated by the senses they convey. If the string of letters that compose the name “Aristotle” is associated by two subjects with two distinct senses, then the subjects do not express the same thought when uttering “Aristotle was born in Stagira.”⁴¹

The same idea is expressed in *The Thought*, during a discussion on the sense of proper names:

³⁸ Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 176.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Tyler Burge in “Sinning against Frege” comments that Frege allows for variation in the sense expressed by a proper name across contexts and among subjects. However, May in “The Invariance of Sense,” 6, convincingly argues that Frege could not accept the variability thesis, because for him a sign is a pairing of a symbol and a sense (a sign is already an interpreted symbol).

Accordingly, with a proper name, it depends on how whatever it refers to is presented. This can happen in different ways and every such way corresponds with a particular sense of a sentence containing a name. The different thoughts which thus result from the same sentence correspond in their truth-value, of course; that is to say, if one is true then all are true, and if one is false then all are false. Nevertheless their distinctness must be recognized. So it must really be demanded that a single way in which whatever is referred to is presented be associated with every proper name.⁴²

I do not think that this conception fits our understanding of how names work. We would not be normally willing to admit that a difference in aspect leads to a difference in sense. Consider perceptual aspects. I am introducing the name “Henry” to you, by looking at him and saying “He is Henry.” Do you acquire the same mode of presentation that I have of Henry? Maybe you have frontal view of him, while I sit between the two of you and see him only from the left side. Maybe I am sitting in the shade and you are standing in the sun. And, finally, perhaps I am not wearing my glasses, and I am completely color-blind. The perceptual aspect that is available to me may differ in a variety of ways from yours. Should we follow Frege into thinking that most of the times when one is taught how to use a name, one does not quite grasp the correct sense, because the aspect one is presented with is different from that which the other party has access to? Note that a basic fact about teaching one how to use names is the agreement that the aspects that the two subjects have access to are aspects of the same thing. I am, therefore, inclined to say that not every difference in aspect leads to a difference in sense. If it is part and parcel of our conception of an existent that it can undergo change, it should be at least admitted as a hypothesis that the sense of the name has to be analyzed dynamically, as encompassing some of the varying aspects of the name’s referent, entertained by different subjects. I will have more to add about this throughout this thesis and especially in the final chapter.

⁴² Frege, “The Thought,” 208.

1.4 DE RE SENSES

Frege's comment regarding variations in the sense attached to the name "Aristotle" points towards what came to be the orthodox view about the Fregean sense of a proper name. It was assumed, for a long time, that Frege proposed an early version of Descriptivism by identifying the sense of a name with that of a description. This line of interpretation came under serious criticism from Dummett, Evans, and McDowell.⁴³

Nonetheless, it seems to me that the following fragment from Frege can be read only in one way, namely, that in which the two semicolons function as a textual device for showcasing the sense of the name:

[The sense of 'Aristotle'] might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. Anybody who does this will attach another sense to the sentence 'Aristotle was born in Stagira' than will a man who takes as the sense of the name: the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira.⁴⁴

I believe that Frege was trying to show us the sense of the name by writing the description that expresses it and clearly separating it from the rest of the sentence. We have here the roots of Russell's idea that ordinary proper names abbreviate descriptions, because if "Aristotle" has the same sense as that of a description, then the description itself can be viewed as a lengthier verbal form of that which is also communicated by a use of the name. I will not, however, reduce the assertion that the content of a name is a *de re* sense to an exegetical exercise. Even if there was a final argument showing that Frege was committed to endorsing a Descriptivist theory of names, champions of *de re* senses can still claim that this semantic category should be judged by its own merits.

⁴³ Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, and McDowell, "The Sense and Reference of a Proper Name" and "*De re* Senses". For another criticism, see Ackerman, "Proper Names," who argues that pushing Frege's reasoning to its end entails that most names cannot have descriptive connotations.

⁴⁴ Frege, "On Sense and Reference," 176.

The opposition to a Descriptivist reading of Fregean senses is many times combined with a rejection of the idea that senses can exist without reference. The connection is sensible, for if Frege was committed to a notion of senses that are unavailable in the absence of the referent⁴⁵, and a description can make a contribution to the thought expressed by a sentence where it is embedded even in the absence of an object denoted by the description, then Frege was not a Descriptivist.

The idea that names have senses which would not exist, had their referents not existed, is defended by McDowell on the basis of the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* knowledge.⁴⁶ To know the referent of a name is to know an individual, to have *de re* knowledge. One might be equally tempted to view knowledge of the sense of a name as another species of *de re* knowledge and seek an entity that is grasped by the subject who employs the name. McDowell thinks that giving in to the temptation leads inexorably to a misguided search for exotic entities, the senses of names, whose very existence raises the question of how they are related to the names' referents. Yet we are not bound to choose this tack. We may take the alternate route of viewing knowledge of a name's sense as a case of *de dicto* knowledge, i.e., knowledge of truths. One who knows that the proposition that "Hesperus" refers to Hesperus is true would know how to employ the name, without thereby knowing, aside from the referent itself, any other individual, i.e., the sense of the name. The clause "'Aristotle' refers to Aristotle" shows the sense of the name, while *saying* what the referent is.

Knowledge of *de re* senses is not, then, *de re* knowledge of senses. It is only knowledge of the truths of clauses which show the senses of names in the subject's vocabulary. Construed in this manner, knowledge of *de re* senses is fine-grained enough to

⁴⁵ I am intentionally vague. One can hold two types of thesis here. One can say that senses cannot exist in the absence of the referent or, alternatively, one can affirm that senses cannot be grasped in the absence of the object.

⁴⁶ McDowell, "On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name," 162-163.

block substitution of co-referential names. Indeed, the senses of the names “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” are different in that a theory which ascribes to a subject the above piece of knowledge would not also ascribe to him knowledge of the truth that “Hesperus” refers to Phosphorus. Although the information conveyed by the latter sentence is correct, it merely reports knowledge of facts, not knowledge of the sense of the name.

If names have *de re* senses, then empty names are meaningless, because there is nothing that can count as a mode of presentation of the referent or as a way of thinking of it. This may seem surprising, given that Frege at times speaks of empty names that are meaningful, for instance when stating with regard to the thought expressed by “Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep,” that the thought “remains the same whether ‘Odysseus’ has reference or not.”⁴⁷ Defenders of *de re* senses, such as Evans, try to reinterpret such statements in view of the distinction between scientific discourse, which is based on true or false sentences, and fictional discourse, where one is not taken to convey information about the world.⁴⁸

Let me mention now one reason to be concerned about this semantic category. The fact that *de re* senses would not exist in the absence of their referents makes it unclear how sense determines reference. According to the Descriptivist understanding of Frege, the relationship between sense and reference is explained by the relationship between the information conveyed by a description and its denotation. If *de re* senses are unavailable in the absence of the referent, it looks as if reference, along with contextual factors related to the subject and his interaction with the object, determines sense.

⁴⁷ Frege’s attitude towards empty singular terms vacillated among different theoretical approaches. In the discussion about utterances containing names of mythological characters (“On Sense and Reference,” 180), Frege agrees that they express a thought, but goes on to express his doubts about whether they have a truth-value (he also does not seem to be aware that this would be a case of meaning not determining reference). However, a few pages later, he appears to favor an approach that assigns the default value 0 to defective singular terms, i.e., terms that either designate nothing or more than one object (ibid., 185-186, esp. ft. *). Finally, in *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, when considering the case of definite descriptions, Frege suggests assigning to an improper description of the type “the *F*” the set of things that are *F* (the course-of-value for *F*) (49-50).

⁴⁸ Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 29-30. For criticism see Bell, “How ‘Russellian’ was Frege?”

Forbes, for instance, is adamant that resorting to *de re* senses complies with the Fregean dictum:

But Frege held that the sense of a name determines its reference, and it might seem that I have just abandoned that aspect of his view. I do not think this is so.... A sense determines an object as the object it is *of*; which, at least in easy cases, is the object at the start of the channel along which the *de re* information in the dossier has flowed to the thinker. It is just a prejudice to insist that senses must have qualitative features by which they determine objects via satisfaction, as if we somehow first formulate ways of thinking of things independently of cognitive encounters with the world, and are then faced with the problem of finding entities to fit.⁴⁹

The defense may be restated as follows. Suppose I focus on a bit of information about an object that I saw yesterday. As I track the causal pedigree of this piece of information (the environment it was picked up from, the day when I acquired it, and so forth), I identify the object which in fact caused a certain visual image that my cognitive system recorded. This is a case where, allegedly, having a hold of the sense (the way of thinking of that object) determines the object.

But this answer seems to me to confuse the epistemic order with the causal one. It is true, indeed, that the only way I can track down the referent of the object is by relying on the piece of information that I possess of it. Yet, it is trivial that it is the referent which determines the *de re* sense in the plainest meaning of the term: the properties of the object, along with the conditions in which the object is observed, determine the information stored by the system. In other words, the idea that sense determines reference sits badly with the point that the object must be “at the start of the channel along which the *de re* information in the dossier has flowed to the thinker.”

⁴⁹ Forbes, “The Indispensability of Sinn,” 539-540.

1.5 INTENTIONALITY AND UNSATURATEDNESS

I want to discuss in what follows a certain consequence of Frege's idea that concepts are unsaturated entities, which, I believe, sheds light over our understanding of intentionality as an essential feature of minds. It is often held that direct reference theories enjoy an advantage over Descriptivist theories with regard to analyzing singular propositions, in particular with respect to explaining their intentionality.

A semantic theorist who endorses the theory of direct reference holds that the information that an utterance of "Aristotle is a philosopher" transmits is simply that Aristotle is a philosopher. In this view, the semantic values that both the name and the predicate contribute to the proposition expressed are the entities that the name and predicate have been assigned: the individual Greek philosopher for the name, and the property of being a philosopher for the predicate. By contrast, Frege held that the thought that this utterance expresses is about an individual in virtue of containing an individual concept that determines the individual Aristotle. This may make it look as if the utterance pertains to the individual concept, and not the individual who falls under it.

The idea that concepts would get in the way of our intention to speak about objects might be seen as a distortion of the original point that the utterance is *about* Aristotle directly. Intentionality as a relation does not seem to be reducible to two more primitive relations, one that holds between subjects and concepts, and one that holds between concepts and objects. By introducing a conceptual level that mediates our access to the object, Frege would account for a direct relation in an incorrect way. Russell's Theory of Descriptions is held to flaunt this intuition even more radically, for, as we shall see, Russell argued that, properly speaking, one's thought that Aristotle is a philosopher is not about anything at all.

I will not take issue with the criticism leveled against Russell. The oddity of the notion that in saying "Henry is tall" one does not mean to speak about any one particular

thing is something that Russell was well aware of. What he thought, however, was that the peculiarity of this view is preferable to foregoing a Cartesian view of the mind. Yet the above argument is more debatable when it accuses Frege of distorting a direct relation in favor of a composite of two other relations.

We have here two claims that we had better clearly separate. The first is that Frege cannot account for the idea that one's thought that Aristotle is a philosopher is about Aristotle directly. The second is that the theory of direct reference is better equipped to handle intentionality. Both claims, I shall argue, are wrong.

To begin with, Frege did not conceive of concepts as getting in our way to objects. This idea is the result of viewing language as a pure formalism, a set of rule-sanctioned combinations of different syntactic objects.⁵⁰ From this perspective, a language is first defined syntactically, by laying out the vocabulary and rules that determine the class of well-formed formulae, and then given an interpretation. But this is not how Frege viewed language. He constantly spoke of symbols, which are interpreted marks and he did not hint that thoughts may somehow exist prior to being given an interpretation. A thought is *already* an interpretation. Concepts do not, therefore, come between our minds and objects.

Secondly, we can restate the difference between the Fregean and direct reference approaches by saying that for Frege thoughts are intentional, while for an advocate of direct reference propositions cannot be so. The theory of direct reference holds that the content of one's utterance that Aristotle is a philosopher contains, literally speaking, the philosopher Aristotle. It is because of this inclusion of the intentional object in the propositional make-up that the theory of direct reference is guaranteed never to lose track of the object meant. But obviously we cannot attach proper meaning to the statement that the proposition is about Aristotle because the proposition contains Aristotle. Intentionality and being contained are

⁵⁰ See also May, "The Invariance of Sense."

both relations, but, plainly, of different types. “To be about Aristotle” is similar to “to look at the girl on the bench” or “to head towards the cafeteria.” “To be contained in a proposition” is similar to “to be in the left pocket” or “to sit down in the third row of the theater.” A set is not about any, some or all of its members, although it contains them. A whole is not about its parts. The car parked in front of my building is not about its steering wheel.

The result of these observations is that the theory of direct reference cannot say that semantic content is the bearer of intentionality, because it would say something obviously incorrect. In contrast, for Frege thoughts are bearers of intentionality. That which we express in uttering “Aristotle is a philosopher” is about Aristotle in virtue of containing an individual concept that determines Aristotle. Concepts are, according to Frege, unsaturated entities. They manifestly and essentially lack something that only an object can provide. Because a subject can only grasp concepts, his mind apprehends something that is unsaturated, that shows itself to the subject as lacking something. That which it lacks is the intentional object or the object meant. The way in which the mind experiences the unsaturated character of the concept is by being oriented towards that which is said to be determined by the concept, i.e., the intentional object. Indeed, the claim that every mental state is intentional finds a natural support in the supposition that the mind can grasp *only* concepts, supplemented with the view that *all* mental states are conceptual.

CHAPTER 2 – RUSSELL

2.1 THE PRINCIPLES OF MATHEMATICS

Russell originally attempted to propose a semantic theory that assigns denotations to all phrases, including quantified ones. The theory he sketched in the *Principles of Mathematics* (henceforth, *PoM*) is based on the methodological assumptions that “every word occurring in a sentence must have *some* meaning” and that “on the whole, grammar seems to me to bring us much nearer to a correct logic than the current opinions of philosophers.”⁵¹ The theory exposed in *PoM* assumes the existence of terms and propositional functions. The first are Russell’s name for individuals, be they things or concepts.⁵² The second are functions from terms to propositions.

This minimal set-up enables us to note a few differences between Frege’s views and those of Russell. To begin with, Frege believed that concepts can never occur on the position of logical subject. In the sentence “The concept *horse* is a concept,” the first three words denote in Frege’s theory an object and not the concept *horse*. For Russell, the category of terms includes not only objects, but also concepts. The second difference concerns the restrictions placed on the propositional make-up. Russell allows that ordinary objects can literally be parts of a proposition. “[A] proposition, unless it happens to be linguistic, does not itself contain words: it contains the entities indicated by words.”⁵³ In contrast, Frege allowed

⁵¹ Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, 42. Russell goes on to qualify the reliance on the surface form by stating that grammar is “not our master,” but only a reliable guide. In the Introduction to the 2nd edition, published after Russell discovered his Theory of Descriptions, he rejects the earlier view: “This way of understanding language turned out to be mistaken. That a word ‘must have *some* meaning’ – the word, of course, not being gibberish, but one which has an intelligible use – is not always true if taken as applying to the word in isolation. What is true is that the word contributes to the meaning of the sentence in which it occurs; but that is a very different matter.” (page X)

⁵² Ibid., 43–44.

⁵³ Ibid., 47. Russell vacillates throughout *PoM* between use and mention, sometimes speaking of propositions as if they are linguistic entities, sometimes using the term to refer to the content of a declarative sentence.

only senses to compose thoughts.⁵⁴ Russell speaks of propositions in connection with the category of declarative sentences. Propositions are primarily what is said (stated) when one attempts to depict or represent the world as being in a certain way. Frege arrives at the notion of senses by noting that a naïve explanation of representational content (objects for names and concepts for predicate letters) does not account for differences in cognitive value between sentences that are assigned the same representational content. Finally, it would be imprecise to identify Fregean concepts with Russellian propositional functions. Fregean concepts are functions whose values are the True or the False. Russellian propositional functions take as arguments individuals (terms) and output as value propositions. A Fregean understanding of concepts allows for a hierarchy of concepts. Indeed, quantifiers are second-order concepts. On the other hand, Russellian propositional functions can range only over terms.

Russell views the assignment of a proposition to an utterance as a clarification of the intentional features of the utterance. A use of the sentence “I met Henry” is about Henry because the individual himself is literally a constituent of the proposition expressed. I have already criticized this understanding of intentionality in the final part of the last chapter. Now we shall see that the same assumption leads to a difficulty in developing a semantic account of quantified phrases. Russell quickly noticed that there is a class of phrases for which the naïve assignment of semantic values does not explain what the phrases purport to designate. Take for instance the phrase “every girl” as occurring in the utterance “Every girl was walking on the beach.” In *PoM*, Russell was of the view that the phrase should be assigned as semantic value the concept *every girl* (the propositional function *x was walking on the beach* would then be applied to this term to yield the proposition that every girl was walking on the beach). However, it is clear that a subject who utters the above sentence does not mean to

⁵⁴ Thus, for Russell, but not for Frege, Mont Blanc itself is part of the proposition expressed by “Mont Blanc is more than 4000 metres high.” (Frege, *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence*, 169.)

assert anything about the concept *every girl*, but rather wants to say something that applies to all girls. Russell called such phrases “denoting phrases” and the concepts they express “denoting concepts.”

A concept *denotes*, when, if it occurs in a proposition, the proposition is not *about* the concept, but about a term connected in a peculiar way with the concept. If I say “I met a man,” the proposition is not about *a man*: this is a concept which does not walk the streets, but lives in the shadowy limbo of the logic-books. What I met was a thing, not a concept, an actual man with a tailor and a bank-account or a public-house and a drunken wife.⁵⁵

Russell’s solution was to assign to each denoting concept a certain combination of individuals. The intentional features of utterances containing denoting phrases are clarified by investigating the denotation of their semantic values. In the sentence “Brown and Jones are two of Miss Smith’s suitors,” the denoting complex *Brown and Jones* denotes a combination of the two individuals. This type of combination is different from that denoted by the concept *Brown or Jones* in the sentence “Miss Smith will marry Brown or Jones.” Since an utterance of the last sentence is equivalent to saying that either Miss Smith will marry Brown or that she will marry Jones, the expression denotes a disjunctive combination of Brown and Jones. In general, in a sentence of the form “All *F*s are *G*,” the quantified phrase denotes a conjunction of *F*s taken collectively, whereas in a sentence of the form “Some *F*s are *G*,” the quantified phrase denotes a disjunction of *F*s.⁵⁶

An utterance of the sentence “I met some man” is not about the specific person that I report to have encountered in a particular situation in the same way in which the proposition that I met Henry is about Henry. Rather, the proposition contains the concept *some man*, which further denotes a combination of individuals.

⁵⁵ Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, 53.

⁵⁶ Russell thinks that, in a sentence of the form “Every *F* is *G*”, the expression “every *F*” denotes all *F*s “severally instead of collectively.” (*The Principles of Mathematics*, 58-59.)

Thus the concrete event which happened is not asserted in the proposition. What is asserted is merely that some one of a class of concrete events took place. The whole human race is involved in my assertion: if any man who ever existed or will exist had not existed or been going to exist, the purport of my proposition would have been different.... [*Some man* must not be regarded as actually denoting Smith and actually denoting Brown, and so on: the whole procession of human beings throughout the ages is always relevant to every proposition in which *some man* occurs, and what is denoted is essentially not each separate man, but a kind of combination of all men.⁵⁷

What is conveyed by an utterance of “I met some man” is that either I met Smith or I met Brown and so on for each man that has existed or will exist in the history of the world. It is worth noting that Russell’s point can be interpreted as saying that quantified phrases have to be analyzed in a two-dimensional semantic framework. Russell does not merely say that the proposition expressed by “I met a man” is equivalent at this world to a disjunction of singular propositions, but makes the stronger claim that “if any man who ever existed or will exist had not existed or been going to exist, the purport of my proposition would have been different.”⁵⁸ If we read “the purport of a proposition” as what the proposition is about, then had somebody uttered the sentence “I met a man” at a world whose domain is not identical to that of the actual world, he would have stated something entirely different than what is said by an actual utterance of the same sentence.

One can protest against this way of understanding utterances of quantified phrases by pointing out that Aristotle’s absence is of little import to what I would like to express by saying “I met a man.” But this is a worry which can be easily addressed by restricting the range of the variable to men that I met up to the point of uttering the sentence. Finally, to isolate the specific event I mean to speak about, let us assume that I am in fact uttering “On December 31, 2008, I met a man.” Now it is simply not so clear any longer that, in this sense of using “a man,” the absence of an individual that I was acquainted with is irrelevant to what

⁵⁷ Ibid., 62

⁵⁸ It should be obvious that Russell employs here the term “proposition” to speak about the sentence “I met a man”. “The purport of my proposition would have been different” simply means “what I meant by uttering these words would have been different.”

is said. Consider an utterance of the above sentence made in conditions of severe amnesia that leads me to forgetting the name of each man I was introduced to. Suppose further that, as a matter of fact, I live a rather secluded existence and have only met three men, namely, Henry, Jones, and Smith. It would appear now rather intuitive to say that in uttering “I met a man” I am saying that I met either Henry or Jones or Smith. *The information* that I want to convey is such that, had I met somebody else, the relevant facts that I would have attempted to represent would have been entirely different. If I was put in front of my acquaintances, and was told that they were the only men I had ever met, I could be inclined to answer “So on December 31, 2008, I met one of *you*,” without feeling that I was doing violence to what I had initially reported.

2.2 THE THEORY OF DESCRIPTIONS

Combinations of individuals, whose structure reflects the complexity of the denoting concepts, are difficult to accept in one’s ontology. Moreover, Russell’s proposal implies that aboutness is not always clarified by assignment of semantic values. We have, therefore, good reasons to look for a unitary and more ontologically restrained analysis of denoting phrases. Russell soon realized that he can accomplish this, if he denies that the meaning of denoting phrases has to be explained in the same manner in which we account for the content of names. If descriptions do not contribute any one specific thing to the proposition expressed, then the analogy with names disappears.

Definite descriptions cannot be assigned any value prior to being used in a sentence. They superficially resemble names, but their deep, logical form is of incomplete symbols. The contribution of a name to the proposition expressed is always a complete entity. In contrast, the contribution made by a description to the proposition expressed resembles bits that can be re-assembled, along with other ingredients, into different propositions.

Russell's idea was, thus, that the semantic contribution of a definite description can be explained by defining the role it plays in an utterance where it is used. Descriptions are to be defined contextually. Thus, the definition 14.01 in *Principia Mathematica*,⁵⁹

$$(14.01) [(\lambda x)(\phi x)] \cdot \psi(\lambda x)(\phi x) \cdot = : (\exists b): \phi x \cdot =_x \cdot x=b : \psi b$$

or in contemporary symbolism,

$$[(\lambda x)(\phi x)] \cdot \psi(\lambda x)(\phi x) = (\exists x)[\phi x \ \& \ (\forall y)(\phi y \supset x=y) \ \& \ \psi x]$$

According to the definition, an utterance of the form “The *F* is *G*” is, appearances notwithstanding, similar not to “Henry sleeps,” but to “At least one man walks on the street.” The feeling that we speak about somebody in particular comes not from the fact that the description functions like a name, but from the fact that it contributes a uniqueness condition to the proposition expressed. Russell's decision to treat quantified phrases as incomplete symbols implies that utterances containing definite descriptions are not about anything at all. They do not include any one particular individual, unless the individual is specified in order to define the uniqueness condition, as in “Henry's wife” or “my wife”, uttered by Paul. Indefinite descriptions are to be defined also contextually, but their contribution to the proposition expressed will not include the uniqueness conditions. “An *F* is *G*” means that there is at least an *F* which is also *G*. In Russell's theory, definite descriptions are analyzed like indefinite descriptions, supplemented with the uniqueness condition.

Russell did not see his theory as one that provides an answer only to the semantics of definite descriptions. As Kripke notes⁶⁰, his is a philosophical attempt to analyze all denoting

⁵⁹ Whitehead and Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, Vol.1, 184.

phrases, including “all F ” or “some F ”.⁶¹ As a general principle, “All F ” contributes a universal quantifier to the utterance, while “some F ” contributes an existential one.

A direct consequence of the fact that denoting phrases are incomplete symbols is that they exhibit scope ambiguities. If the contribution made by a denoting phrase can be likened to a part which can be fit, along with other fragments, to produce a proposition, it stands to reason that the same fragment can be positioned in more than one structure to compose different propositions.

Consider the sentence “At least one woman is loved by every man.” The sentence can mean either that for each man there is at least a woman such that the man loves her or that there is at least one woman such that all men love her. Formally, the distinction can be clarified by deciding which of the two quantifiers, introduced by “at least a woman” and “every man”, takes wide scope with regard to the other quantifier:

- a. $(\forall x) (\exists y) ((Mx \ \& \ Wy) \supset Lxy)$
- b. $(\exists y) (\forall x) ((Mx \ \& \ Wy \ \& \ Lxy)$

⁶⁰ Kripke, “Russell’s Notion of Scope,” 1007.

⁶¹ Following Stephen Neale (*Descriptions*, 38-47), it is customary to distinguish between the syntactic and semantic recommendations of the Theory of Descriptions, when applying the theory developed in *Principia Mathematica* to natural languages. The semantic proposal is that a sentence of the form “The F is G ” is true iff there is a unique F that is also G . The syntactic proposal is couched using the formal language of *Principia Mathematica*, and does not have to be endorsed necessarily by a champion of the semantic proposal. There are two suggestions available for expressing the syntax of sentences in a natural language, which contain quantified phrases. The first is to view the determiner (e.g., “all”, “some”, “the”, or “a”) as restricting the formula to which it is applied and yielding a restricted quantifier. Thus, the sentence “The current U.S. President is a Democrat” will be symbolized as [the x : current U.S. President x] (member of the Democratic Party x). The second proposal is to view a determiner as a binary quantifier, i.e., as a quantifier that combines at the same time with two formulae to form a sentence. The sentence “The current U.S. President is a Democrat” would be symbolized as [the x] (current U.S. President x : member of the Democratic Party x).

2.3 THREE PUZZLES

Russell crafted his Theory of Descriptions in order to solve three puzzles that arise from the interpretation of definite descriptions as singular terms. In the following, I will briefly review the puzzles and assess whether they point unequivocally towards the rejection of the idea the definite descriptions are singular terms. The first puzzle pertains to propositional attitude reports. If definite descriptions are singular terms, then they can be substituted with other singular terms, while preserving truth value. Yet, although George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*, we would be reluctant to say that he actually wished to know whether Scott is Scott, given that Scott is indeed the author of this historical novel. But, if descriptions are not singular terms, then we can model the King's inquiry either as

George IV wished to know whether there is a sole author of *Waverley* such that he is identical to Scott.

or as saying that

Regarding the sole author of *Waverley*, George IV wished to know if he is (identical to) Scott.

Note that treating descriptions like incomplete symbols makes the distinction between sense and reference otiose. Frege provided a second level of semantic entities, in addition to referents, in order to explain how one could find informative a thought such as that the author

of *Waverley* is Scott. But the *de dicto* interpretation clarifies the King's curiosity without resorting to senses.⁶²

Russell's example constitutes a puzzle if one necessary condition for being a singular term is the fact that the term can be substituted *salva veritate* with other co-referential terms in any context. Yet it is debatable if this requirement is not too stringent. First, as Jennifer Saul noted, there are cases of declarative sentences, where substitution of co-referential names seems to alter the information conveyed.⁶³ Thus, the following two utterances seem to transmit different information, even though the second is obtained from the first by substituting "Superman" with "Clark Kent":

Clark Kent went into the phone booth, and Superman came out.

Clark Kent went into the phone booth, and Clark Kent came out.

Second, one can simply deny that substitution *salva veritate* in all contexts is a necessary condition for being a singular term. Russell was of this view since he thought that the semantic value of a name is its referent. However, one can reject this requirement, say instead that the hallmark of a singular term is that it designates always the same individual, and then tender an explanation of how a name or a description can track the same individual in any circumstance of evaluation.

⁶² Kripke remarked that this is not so clear ("Russell's Notion of Scope," 1023.) His argument is that, if Russell's analysis is correct, then one of its consequences is that George IV wished to know if there is a unique author of *Waverley*. However, as Kaplan replies on Russell's behalf ("Reading 'On Denoting' on Its Centenary," 985), the derivation

S wishes to know if there is at least an *x* which is both *F* and *G*, therefore *S* wishes to know if there is at least an *x* which is *F*

is not valid. If one wants to know if there are honest men, it does not mean that one wants to know if there are men.

⁶³ Saul, "Substitution and Simple Sentences," 102.

The second puzzle that troubled Russell is caused by an application of the law of excluded middle to sentences containing definite descriptions on the subject position. Either “The King of France is bald” is true or “The King of France is not bald” is true. But truth for a singular proposition of the type that a is F is grounded in the fact that a has the property F . In other words, if one listed the things that have F , one would also mention a . However, enumerating all things which are bald or all things which are not bald will not also mean mentioning the King of France. Thus, either each of the above sentences is not of the form “ a is F ” or the law of excluded middle does not have universal ambit.

Russell intended to solve this problem by appealing to the idea that descriptions can be scope ambiguous. He held the view that the sentence “The King of France is not bald” can be clarified either as meaning that

(wide scope) There is a unique King of France who is not bald.

or as meaning that

(narrow scope) It is not true that there is a unique King of France who is also bald.

We should, first, note that, even if this analysis is correct, the law of excluded middle is not restored in its universality, unless we assume that only the narrow scope reading⁶⁴ is available in sentences of the type “The F is not G ,” where the description is non-denoting.⁶⁵ Russell, indeed, makes this assumption, when stating

⁶⁴ Secondary occurrence, in Russell’s terminology.

⁶⁵ This also raises the question of how *denoting* descriptions should be treated when occurring in sentences of the form “The F is not G .” Russell cannot claim that in such cases only the narrow scope reading is available, because that is obviously incorrect (one who states now “The current US president is not a Republican” asserts something clearly true.) If denoting descriptions have both scope readings available, then we can ask why non-

“[T]he King of France is not bald” is false if the occurrence of “the King of France” is primary, and true if it is secondary. Thus all propositions in which “the King of France” has a primary occurrence are false; the denials of such propositions are true, but in them “the King of France” has a secondary occurrence.⁶⁶

But this proposal is consistent with the idea that descriptions are singular terms, as long as we allow, as in free logic, that atomic declarative sentences in which non-denoting terms occur are false (Russell could not entertain the idea that a singular term can be meaningful in the absence of its referent). Then the sentence “The King of France is bald” will be assessed as false and the narrow scope reading of the description in “The King of France is not bald” will be true. This also allows for the description to be given wide scope in the sentence “The King of France is not bald” with the consequence that its denial

It is not true that: the King of France is such that: he is not bald.

will be counted as true and not equivalent to

The King of France is bald.

Russell’s third puzzle is a replay of the Platonic riddle concerning the possibility of saying (thinking) about that which does not exist. If descriptions are like names, then they have meaning inasmuch as they stand for an object. But now suppose there is no unique *F*. Then it seems that we cannot assert that “The *F* does not exist,” because this would deny the

denoting descriptions should be refused this syntactical option merely on the account that they happen not to be true of an individual.

⁶⁶ Russell, “On Denoting,” 490.

existence of something which has to exist for the phrase “the F ” to have meaning (Russell’s own example is “The difference of A and B does not exist”, when A and B do not differ).

However, there is no reason to assume that the meaningfulness of definite descriptions derives from the fact that they stand for something. To say that the F does not exist is simply to assert that it is not true that there is a sole thing which is F , and this can happen if nothing is F or being F is a property which more than one thing has. As before, if we read “The F does not exist” as the denial of the sentence “The F exists,” then we can say that the latter sentence is false, because it contains a non-denoting singular term, and the former sentence is true, because it is the denial of a falsehood.

None of the above three puzzles provides a knockdown argument against the thesis that definite descriptions are singular terms. What they do show, however, is an implicit appeal to the idea that the semantic value of a singular term consists in its referent and it is to this claim that I shall turn in what follows.

2.4 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF THE CATEGORY OF LOGICALLY PROPER NAMES

The Russellian paradigm of a singular term is a logically proper name. The only semantic function that logically proper names can play is to tag individuals. Since their semantic import is exhausted by their referents, there are no empty genuine names. However, Russell was aware that one can easily hallucinate an object which does not exist. If the subject wished to introduce a name during the hallucination, it should follow that he would not say anything when stating that n is F . Russell found himself in front of a choice.

On the one hand, he could hold that such scenarios indicate that one can be under the impression that one entertains a thought, yet fail to do so. On the other hand, he could claim

that we should restrict the range of names to expressions that are guaranteed to refer and deny, in effect, that scenarios such as the above involve genuine proper names.

Given his Cartesian conviction that a subject could not be mistaken in believing that he entertains the thought that n is F , while there is no such thought available, Russell concluded that logically proper names must refer to sense data, because one could never fail to refer to them ('this' or 'that', used to indicate sense data, are the closest counterparts in English to Russellian logically proper names). Note, however, that another party would not be able *to understand* any longer what is communicated by "That is red," given that the function of the demonstrative is to single out an element in one's private experience of the world. The hearer may infer, based on his command of English, that the speaker believes that there is one red object in his vicinity, but he would not be able to comprehend the utterance that *that* is red. The consequence of Russell's move is that ordinary proper names are not in fact logically proper names, because Russell believed that, for each ordinary proper name, one could always imagine a scenario where one can meaningfully deny the existence of the name's referent. Ordinary proper names are abbreviated descriptions.⁶⁷

According to the present analysis, a subject can utter a meaningful "that," only when he is entertaining the appearance of a single object. Yet this claim does not reflect how we ordinarily think about the world. I may be in the position to say "That is red," while I am perfectly aware that I am not experiencing anything. I can make believe that I see a red object, because I want to deceive you. Since there is no sense data of an object that can be normally assigned to my use of the demonstrative, Russell's theory would imply that I am not saying anything at all and that I cannot entertain any thought whatsoever. Yet, it seems to me that I do entertain a false thought, namely, that the object that I am looking at is red, and I knowingly do so. One can suggest here that I engage in a kind of activity similar to yearning

⁶⁷ In contrast, contemporary Russellians will take the other tack, allowing names to refer to common-sense objects and accepting that one can be wrong about the contents of one's own mind.

a story or writing fiction, but this would overlook the fact that, where there is no point of saying something true or false, there should be no point in deceiving.

Russell's empiricist leanings are evident in his instinct to look for a category of thoughts where there is no distinction between the experiential intake (how the world appears to one) and the thought that may be formed as a result of this intake. In thinking "That is red," one does not contribute anything aside from what is already experienced. What the subject thinks, i.e., the content of his thought, is how the world seems to be. Error is not possible at this primitive level. It can only appear at a more complex level, e.g., when the subject hypothesizes about the object causing the current sensation. Yet the autonomy of the mind can be noticed even at the most basic level of thinking. The possibility of entertaining thoughts which go against current appearances undermines the thesis that there is anything like a Russellian logically proper name.

The availability of thoughts that arise as a result of pretending that appearances are different from what they actually are also shows that indexicals or demonstratives cannot be separated from descriptions as neatly as Russell wanted and that his analysis is mistaken in seeking to identify objects that are guaranteed to exist. What is needed is a Cartesian account of thoughts that allows intentionality where no objects exist. I said in the previous chapter that a Fregean conception seems to me to be generally correct: the aboutness of our thoughts is not guaranteed by a special class of referents, but by their logical form alone. The above explanation does assume a form of direct reference, but only for predicates. The content of the predicate "red" is simply the universal that is assigned to the predicate. If universals are "in" objects, then in thinking about a universal that is singly exemplified in my environment, I am thinking about an object by grasping one of its parts. There is no indirectness here. The concept unifies the mind and the world.

Russell's distinction between logically proper names and quantified phrases is epistemological through and through. Let us define with Russell knowledge by acquaintance as knowledge of a thing with which "I have a direct cognitive relation to..., i.e., when I am directly aware of the object itself."⁶⁸ It is "the converse of the relation of object and subject which constitutes presentation".⁶⁹ Among the entities Russell considered as being objects of such knowledge are sense data, universals, and, possibly, one's own self. In contrast, knowledge by description occurs when "we know that it is '*the* so-and-so,' i.e., when we know that there is one object, and no more, having a certain property; and it will generally be implied that we do not have knowledge of the same object by acquaintance."⁷⁰ The entities that can be known by acquaintance are foundational in providing the building blocks for descriptive thoughts:

The fundamental epistemological principle in the analysis of propositions containing descriptions is this: *Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted.*⁷¹

Since Russell believed that we cannot have direct access to objects, it follows that understanding a statement containing a definite description cannot proceed like one that features a logically proper name. Because we cannot be acquainted with objects that are the purported referents of definite descriptions, the proposition expressed by a sentence embedding a definite description can only contain the other type of constituent we are acquainted with: concepts. The proposition does not contain the denotation of the description, but a qualitative complex that singly identifies the denotation. For example, we might essay to entertain a singular thought concerning Bismarck and, yet, because we do not have access to the statesman himself, but only to our sense data of him, we will always grasp a descriptive

⁶⁸ Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Description," 249.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 252

⁷¹ Ibid., 254.

thought. We do not know the singular thought that Bismarck was an astute diplomat, in the sense of knowing its constituents. What we do know, instead, is a thought that describes the singular thought we would like to grasp.

Extricated from other Russellian assumptions, the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description can be seen as implying the existence of different epistemic routes to an object. If one admits, contra Russell, that we can have knowledge by acquaintance of ordinary objects, e.g., by looking at them, then it is not contradictory at all to say that one can have, of the same object, both knowledge by acquaintance (in virtue of seeing it) and knowledge by description (in virtue of being told by someone that the object is so-and-so).

Let me review a more troublesome feature of the analysis at this stage. If one told you “There is a unique F who is also G ,” and by this made it clear that he speaks in the way in which first-order predicate logic would have him say these words, then, according to Russell, you would comprehend everything because the propositional components that are so expressed are concepts which you can know by acquaintance (or conceive, in Russell’s words). Now, why wouldn’t *this* be simply another example of what can be known by acquaintance, along with such instances as “This is red” or “That is heavy”? Why should we count it as an example of knowledge by description? The obvious answer is that we would like to say something *about* the object that the description denotes. It is essential in securing a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description that one take the descriptive thought expressed by the Russellian expansion of “The F is G ” as a clarification of the kind of attempt made to designate the description’s denotation.

This means that denotation has to be construed as a genuine property of descriptions, if the distinction between the two types of knowledge should not collapse. And yet, denotation is exactly a semantic mirage caused by a misunderstanding of grammar.

Denotation is an inert property of descriptions: whether a description denotes or not, what is said by using it in an utterance stays the same. Definite descriptions are dissolved by Russell's analysis into sub-propositional components that are meaningless on their own. There is no part regarding which we could say "This is where the description's contribution is located."

The trouble stems from the following. If knowledge by acquaintance is foundational as Russell wants it to be, then anything that is included in a descriptive thought that we understand is an entity that one is acquainted with. But that would make knowledge by description a case of knowledge by acquaintance and Russell wants it to be a different type of knowledge. Russell wants to justify this difference by pointing out that descriptive thoughts are the kind of thoughts that one would have when, say, one essayed a thought about Bismarck. This kind of aboutness can be cashed at the level of Russell's analysis only as denoting. Yet, denoting cannot be a genuine property, because that would mean acknowledging that there is something at the grammatical level which cannot be accounted for in the Russellian expansion. If the thought that the *F* is *G* is just the thought that there is a unique *F* which is *G*, then there is no fundamental difference between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.

Russell's comment that ordinary proper names abbreviate one or more descriptions naturally leads to the question: what is the type of descriptions that spell out the meaning of a proper name? Before analyzing extant answers in the next section, I should stress that Russell's semantic and epistemological principles can be disentangled from one another. Thus, his thesis that ordinary proper names abbreviate definite descriptions is conceptually distinct from his Theory of Descriptions. One can endorse the view that descriptions are quantified phrases, while holding, as neo-Russellians do, that ordinary objects are objects of acquaintance and that, if nothing is referred to when a name is introduced, then nothing is

said by a sentence embedding the name. Yet this distinction also makes available a second possible reaction, which is to hold that the Theory of Descriptions is incorrect because certain definite descriptions act as singular terms and that ordinary proper names abbreviate a mass of descriptions associated with the name's referent. This thesis will argue for the latter position.

Similarly, Russell's analysis of definite descriptions must be separated from his epistemological bias. Most contemporary Russellians have lost faith in a theory of knowledge based on sense data, without this impacting in any way their confidence that descriptions are ultimately to be represented as quantified phrases. Lastly, Russell's insistence that singular propositions literally contain objects is not crucial for maintaining that singular propositions are different from general or existential propositions. We saw that one can accept that modes of presentation can be propositional constituents, while rejecting the idea that they would be available in the absence of the name's referent. Such a position still operates with a distinction between object-dependent propositions and object-independent ones, yet it denies the possibility that objects might be propositional components.⁷²

2.5 TYPES OF DESCRIPTIVISM

2.5.1 Causal Descriptivism

The proposal which has been sketched until now is merely a framework, for it has not been explained yet which descriptions a subject associates with a given name. The first type of answer builds on the idea that the introduction of a name usually takes place in a setting where there is causal interaction with the name's referent. The name is then passed on from one subject to another, via a network that relies either on perceptual contact with the referent

⁷² See Neale, *Descriptions*, 48.

or indirect information about it, in the form of testimonies.⁷³ For a name *n*, the theory states that the meaning of *n* is that of the description “the entity that caused the current use of *n*”. Call this form of Descriptivism “Causal Descriptivism.”

One might think that the theory could be also presented as stating that the meaning of *n* is given by the description “the entity that caused my current use of *n*”. However, this proposal would make it difficult to fathom how the linguistic meaning of a name can be shared. As Raatikainen notes⁷⁴, because this version of Causal Descriptivism builds into the definition of a name’s meaning an indexical (“my current use of *n*”), it makes one’s utterance of “*n* is *F*” mean something different from any other subject’s similar utterance, on the assumption that the possessive contributes a subject-index.⁷⁵

Causal Descriptivism has been criticized on the score of supposing a rather unlikely amount of conceptual knowledge. Devitt and Sterelny argue that speakers do not usually operate with a philosophically rich type of Causal Descriptivism and that this lack does not impede their ability to refer to objects in their environment.⁷⁶ Yet it is not obvious why expert knowledge is required by Causal Descriptivism. One can hold that the main tenet of this brand of Descriptivism operates with an ordinary notion of causality and argue that, in the absence of this category, we would be unable to understand such practices as introducing a name or passing a name from one subject to another.

However, Causal Descriptivism cannot solve the problem of empty names. Raatikainen notes this problem too, but then goes on to state incorrectly that Causal

⁷³ See for instance Jackson “Reference and Description Revisited,” Pettit, “Descriptivism, Rigidified and Anchored,” and Lewis, “Putnam’s Paradox.” Other papers associated with the theory do not hold it true without further reservations. For instance, Kroon’s “Causal Descriptivism” endorses the view only as an explanation of the way in which the referent of a name is determined (10).

⁷⁴ Raatikainen, “Against Causal Descriptivism,” 82.

⁷⁵ It may be worth noting that Raatikainen himself analyzes only this subject-centered version of Causal Descriptivism. I believe the reason he does so is because he conflates Descriptivism with internalism (81) and is led to address any version of Descriptivism as being couched in terms that do not presuppose an externalist background. However, it is not clear why this should be so. One can, indeed, assume that there is only one public, shared use of a word, and not one private use per speaker.

⁷⁶ Devitt and Sterelny, *Language and Reality*, 61.

Descriptivism “seems to postulate odd referents for such expressions (e.g., the cause of my present usage of ‘Pegasus’).”⁷⁷ Of course, no Russellian brand of Descriptivism has to postulate referents for definite descriptions.⁷⁸ Indeed, part of Russell’s theory was to do away with the perceived need that definite descriptions have to denote in order to be meaningful. Russell’s analysis does not postulate *any* referent for a quantified phrase, descriptions included. The reason why Causal Descriptivism does not provide a sound solution to the problem of empty names is not because it indulges in Meinongian ontology, but because it does not reflect ordinary usage of empty terms. We simply do not use “Pegasus” as implying that a thing caused the current use of the word. Causal interaction is implicitly rejected in the dictionary definition “the *mythological* winged horse fathered by Poseidon with Medusa.”

A related point is that, even if one discovered the initial causal source of our use of “Pegasus,” we would not consider revising our use of the word. Suppose one discovers that the name was introduced as a result of ingesting a hallucinogenic substance. We would not say that that particular piece of the drug is the referent of the name. Every event has a cause, including events of introducing a name, yet we would not look accept just any cause as being the name’s referent. Similarly, if one jokingly introduced the name “Pegasus” for a very slow horse, we would not say “All this time we spoke of that lazy horse.” The myth is too prominent to be abandoned for a mere fact.

Causal Descriptivism is an attempt to fuse Descriptivism with the idea that our thoughts target the world in virtue of their being involved causally with it. Yet I can simply say “Look, I shall name the dog in the apartment next to mine ‘Spotty,’” without having ever seen such a dog, heard about it, or been led to believe that there might be one pet in that apartment. I should still think that, if there is a dog there, I did name something, even if I did not enter into any causal interaction with it (I will add more on this in the final chapter.)

⁷⁷ Raatikainen, “Against Causal Descriptivism,” 82.

⁷⁸ What is even more inexplicable, Raatikainen notes this point as well, but does not seem to appreciate the purport of Russell’s contextual analysis of denoting phrases.

2.5.2 Metalinguistic Descriptivism

A second proposal is that the description giving the meaning of the name n is “the bearer of n ”. The idea makes a passing appearance in Russell’s *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*⁷⁹, when he countenances the proposal that a name can be used to abbreviate the associated metalinguistic description:

[I]f “Scott is Sir Walter” really means “the person named ‘Scott’ is the person named ‘Sir Walter,’” then the names are being used as descriptions: i.e., the individual, instead of being named, is being described as the person having that name.

Clarifying the semantic value of this description yields two version of Metalinguistic Descriptivism. If descriptions are allowed to have senses, then the meaning of a name is identified with the sense of the description “the bearer of n .” This is the version endorsed by Jerold Katz.⁸⁰ If, on the other hand, descriptions are analyzed contextually à la Russell, then the resulting view is similar to that endorsed by Kent Bach in “What’s in a name” and “Descriptivism Distilled.” Because a name regularly has more than one bearer, Katz has to accept that sense does not determine reference, while Bach has to hold that the description associated with a name is improper. While the choice of what is to count as semantic value for the description associated with a name carries philosophical implications, I shall focus here on Bach’s version of Metalinguistic Descriptivism named “the nominal description theory.”

A precursor of Bach’s view can be found in Brian Loar’s article “The Semantics of Singular Terms,” where Loar argues that every description associated with a name must contain, in his terms, the referential qualifier “being the bearer of n ,” which gives the conventional meaning of a name. Uses of the improper description “the bearer of n ” are, then,

⁷⁹ Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, 174.

⁸⁰ Katz, “Names without Bearers.”

assimilated to referential uses of incomplete descriptions, such as “the table” in “The table is made of oak.” While the conventional meaning is that there is a unique table made of oak, the speaker clearly wishes to communicate more than this. Both in Loar’s and Bach’s views, the use of the incomplete description is to be enriched by a predicate available contextually, e.g., “the table over there.” Similarly, although a use of the sentence “*n* is *F*” has the conventional meaning that the bearer of *n* is *F*, a subject who would utter it would probably wish to communicate a proposition of the form that the bearer of *n* who is *G* is *F*.

Advocates of Metalinguistic Descriptivism operate, therefore, with a distinction between meaning and use. The conventional meaning of a name is the improper description “the bearer of *n*,” while any of its uses is suitably enriched in the manner in which incomplete descriptions are pragmatically enriched to yield proper descriptions. However, knowledge of the contextually available predicate is not a pre-condition for grasping the meaning of a name. Command of English requires only that one be able to associate with each name *n* the description “the bearer of *n*.” It does not require one to know the sundry predicates that the subject associates with the name. According to Metalinguistic Descriptivism, names are not ambiguous. “Henry” means “the bearer of ‘Henry.’”

Metalinguistic Descriptivism runs into two obstacles. The first problem is that names can be easily corrupted, orthographically or phonetically.⁸¹ Henry could have been named at birth “Henrik” by his Norwegian mother, but a distracted nurse could have transcribed the boy’s name in the hospital’s records as “Henry.” Did the nurse give Henry a new name? This seems unlikely, especially given the intuition that she intended to partake in the causal chain that began with the act of name-giving performed by Henry’s mother. More generally, it seems plausible that bureaucrats keep distorted records of some names. Think about somebody moving to a new country and seeing his name mangled in various names by

⁸¹ Boër, “Proper Names as Predicates,” 390 and Kroon, “Causal Descriptivism,” ft. 12.

incompetent public servants. Similarly, names can be corrupted phonetically, for instance because one does not have a proper command of the language, or is in a hurry, or thinks it is acceptable to speak with one's mouth full. Metalinguistic Descriptivism entails that each name, syntactically individuated, is associated with a different description and that means, in the previous example, that the mother and the nurse use sentences having different meanings.

Bach replies to these concerns by distinguishing among the meaning of a sentence “*n* is *F*,” which is a uniqueness proposition, the proposition communicated by an utterance of the sentence, which is a singular proposition, and the thought in the mind of the speaker upon uttering the sentence, which is an indexical thought regarding the name's referent.⁸² The mother and the nurse communicate the same (singular) proposition that Henry is a healthy boy, but the linguistic meanings attached to the sentences they utter differ. However, this only shows that the separation between language as a set of signs and use has to be so neatly drawn that it deprives Metalinguistic Descriptivism of much of the initial impetus of early Descriptivism. It may, indeed, look to one as a Pyrrhic victory that Descriptivism can be defended in this manner, while being foregone as an account of communication or thought.

The second problem faced by any version of Metalinguistic Descriptivism is that the description “the bearer of *n*” has a circular air.⁸³ Advocates of this type of Descriptivism have been quick to insist that the charge is baseless, but it is debatable whether they succeeded in quelling all doubts. Thus, Bach states that

[T]he metalinguistic view is not vulnerable to Kripke's well-known circularity objection. He rightly insists that a theory of proper names must avoid using any “notion of reference in a way that is ultimately impossible to eliminate” (1980, 16). He then objects that if “we ask to who does [a speaker] refer by ‘Socrates’, ... the answer is given as, well, he refers to the man to whom he refers” (1980, 70). In fact, however, bearing a name is not the same property as being referred to be that name.... Although it is certainly more convenient to refer to people by their own name, we *could* refer to them instead by their maternal grandmother's name or

⁸² Bach, “Descriptivism Distilled,” 8.

⁸³ Devitt, “Brian Loar on Singular Terms.”

even by their Social Security number. It is no more essential to the property of bearing a name that one be referred to by that name than it is essential to the property of having a certain Social Security number that one be referred to by that number. Bearing a number and being referred to by that name are distinct properties.⁸⁴

We should point out first that, if one used a Social Security number to refer to its bearer, then we would view this as using the number *as a name*. A use of one's Social Security number is available, because it is associated with a name, and it is the name's referential properties that are vicariously used in the act of using the number. To put the point in a different way, if names did not refer, we would not know how to use one's Social Security number to refer to one.

Secondly, Bach is running the risk of equivocating to the point of arguing against a straw man. His critic does not hold that a name has to be actually used all the time for its referent. When Bach says "[i]t is no more essential to the property of bearing a name that one be referred to by that name," he manifestly wants to say that one can stop using a certain name. This is trivially true. Names fall in disrepute or become fashionable (think of nicknames), but this does not have any impact on the fact that what is essential to a name is that one *can* use it to refer, although, one *can* also choose, for various reasons, to use another name instead.

Bach is convinced that Metalinguistic Descriptivism is not affected by Kripke's criticism because he thinks that reference is not a semantic notion, but a pragmatic one:

"[The nominal description theory] is a theory of meaning of names, not a theory of the use of names to refer. For that the help of speech act theory is required. (...) That [the nominal description theory] violates Kripke's noncircularity condition does not show that it is circular, for the condition Kripke lays down is not one of noncircularity. Rather, it stipulates that a theory of names cannot employ an ineliminable notion of reference. However, [the nominal description theory] does not even purport to be a theory of using names to refer."⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Bach, "Descriptivism Distilled," 12.

⁸⁵ Bach, "What's in a name," 379.

Bearing a name is not a word-world relation, but a property that an individual has (think of “bearing the name ‘Henry’” as the property of being baptized – something that involves a social activity). But then again, it seems to me that this is not a genuine answer to the charge of circularity. We can, if we wish, stipulate that semantics is to exclude the notion of reference and its cognates. Nobody can stop us from banishing a notion from one field of inquiry to another. However, the result looks more like a terminological move, than like a serious answer.

It is also highly irregular, taking into account the commonsensical notion that truth requires a notion that connects the word to the world. If I say “Aristotle is a philosopher,” the truth conditions of this sentence are, according to a Descriptivist, of the sort that the so-and-so is a philosopher. The notion of a name’s referring to its bearer becomes in the hands of the Descriptivist the notion that the description associated with the name denotes. However, denotation cannot be only a semantic notion for somebody who endorses Metalinguistic Descriptivism, for the simple reason that the description that clarifies the meaning of a name never denotes, on the account of being improper. What the advocate of Metalinguistic Descriptivism can say here is that, at a context of use, the associated description is enriched with a contextually available predicate, and is, thus, able to denote. The consequence is then that asking about the truth of sentences containing proper names can strictly speaking receive only one answer: they are all false, but they can be enriched in order to communicate true propositions. Again, this is not a knockdown argument. One can dig in one’s heels and decide to accept this conclusion. However, to repeat the point made earlier, it is not clear why we should find *this* understanding of semantics interesting and *this* kind of Descriptivism worth condoning.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Loar himself is not entirely consistent on the issue of whether his account is circular either. If Metalinguistic Descriptivism is correct, then the person who first introduced a name *N* should have relied on “the *F* which bears the name ‘*N*’” and this would trigger a circular regress. Answering this criticism, Loar states that “properly understood, this produces no absurdity. We agree that *N* may be a way of referring to *x*, knowing that

2.5.3 Cluster Descriptivism

The causal and metalinguistic versions of Descriptivism share the assumption that there is one description giving the meaning of a name, which can be spelled out by philosophical analysis. Yet this premise may seem questionable. After all, a quick look at the information we retain about a name's referent shows us that we associate not one, but many descriptions with it. Cluster Descriptivism is the thesis that the meaning of a name is given by the cluster of descriptions one associates with the name. The name's referent, in turn, is the individual that satisfies most of the properties expressed by the descriptions included in the cluster. This qualification is necessary, because it is a fact of life that we sometimes include in the cluster associated with a name information that does not describe its referent, but some other individual or none at all.

John Searle's article "Proper Names" is referenced in connection with this view, but I should stress that Searle's main thesis therein could not have been endorsed by a Descriptivist. Searle was preoccupied to show that "[t]o use a proper name referringly is to presuppose the truth of certain uniquely referring descriptive statements, but it is not ordinarily to assert these statements or even to indicate which exactly are presupposed."⁸⁷ In Searle's view, names offer a welcome means to avoid a settlement of the question "What makes something *n*?" As he puts it, "[t]hey function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions."⁸⁸

The background of presuppositions that guide the use of a name can also explain cognitive significance, without resorting to Fregean senses. An identity statement of the type

this will be possible because on any particular utterance we may exploit the agreement and mean by *N that which is F and which we agreed we might refer to by uttering N*" ("Names and Descriptions," 371, his italics). However, he goes on to say that "one refers to *x* by uttering a singular term just in case *x* instantiates some identifying concept which is intrinsic to what one means and which has wider scope" (ibid., 374). Now, since, per the above quote, the identifying concept has the form "the *F* which we agreed we might refer to by uttering *N*", we do obtain a vicious regress in defining reference.

⁸⁷ Searle, "Proper Names," 171.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 172.

“ $a=b$ ” is analytic just in case the two names have the same presuppositions. Searle cites approvingly Strawson’s thesis that the use of a name presupposes that there is a unique object referred to⁸⁹, but seems unaware of the fact that Strawson’s notion is incompatible with his explanation of what we mean by a negative existential: “The statement [“Aristotle never existed”] asserts that a sufficient number of the conventional presuppositions, descriptive statements, of referring uses of “Aristotle” is false.”⁹⁰ If Searle intended to use “presuppose” in the sense that Strawson did⁹¹, namely, that S presupposes S' iff the truth of S' is a necessary condition of the truth or falsity of S , then if the presuppositions associated with the referring uses of “Aristotle” are false, Searle should have rather said that the statement “Aristotle never existed” lacks a truth-value.

Indeed, as McKinsey shows⁹², the best way to make sense of Searle’s comments is simply to take names as abbreviating the cluster of descriptions that are assumed by the subject as true of the name’s referent. Searle’s theory may be then strengthened by allowing that different weights are associated with different descriptions included in the cluster.⁹³ The fact that Aristotle taught Alexander is more important than the fact that he was born in Stagira. Upon discovering that Aristotle had been born in a neighboring village, we would not come to question whom we are speaking about when we utter the name “Aristotle.” The cluster of descriptions we associate with a name looks like a net, where different parts support one another, with some playing a more central role, and others playing a more peripheral one.

Cluster Descriptivism is an extremely persuasive theory for the phenomenon of fixing the reference of a name. The following formulation, due to McKinsey, where α is a name

⁸⁹ Ibid., 171.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁹¹ Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory*, 175.

⁹² Michael McKinsey, “Searle on Proper Names.”

⁹³ Wilson, “Substances without Substrata,” 535.

token, is a good example of the ability of Cluster Descriptivism to account for reference-fixing:

(CD) *S* refers to *x* with *α* at *t* \equiv_{df} *x* dominantly satisfies the cluster associated by *S* with *α* at *t*.⁹⁴

To say that an object dominantly satisfies a cluster is to say that the object satisfies the set of nonderivative properties associated with the name more than any other object. The distinction between derivative and nonderivative properties is defined, in turn, in terms of the distinction between derivative and nonderivative intentions to denote an object with a certain description. For instance, the description “the ancient Greek that our philosophy professor talked about yesterday” expresses a derivative property of Aristotle, because one’s ability to speak about Aristotle by employing the description relies on the fact that the philosophy professor can produce further identifying material that singles out Aristotle. Further details can be added to this account. A description’s weight can be doubtlessly refined into a technical notion, for instance by adding more variables relevant to its calculation and, maybe, also allowing for a degree of relevance played by contextual factors.

However, Cluster Descriptivism runs into problems as a theory of the meaning of names because a cluster undergoes constant changes. If the meaning of the name “Aristotle” is given by the cluster associated with a use of the name, we are entitled to ask what the composition of the cluster is. If members of the cluster can fade into nonexistence, due to forgetfulness or because newer information falsifies the alleged descriptions, then there is not one single cluster that a subject associates with a name’s referent.

⁹⁴ McKinsey, “Names and Intentionality,” 193.

McKinsey can reply here that, unlike Searle, his clause *CD* applies to tokens of names and so his brand of Cluster Descriptivism may be seen as expounding the meaning of name tokens. This would arguably render his theory immune to the concern raised by the fact that modifications normally occur in a cluster, given that there is only one cluster per one name token. Yet this answer only postpones the more general question: what makes different name tokens belong to the same type? When a subject utters “Aristotle,” he manifestly intends to use it in the same sense as when he used it two weeks, a few months, or several years ago. But what does it mean to say that he uses it *in the same sense*? It cannot mean that he uses the same cluster because very few of us would pass this exacting test.

Moreover, even if the arduous task of discovering the descriptions that are always retained in the cluster associated by the subject with the name “Aristotle” was solved, communication would still be difficult to fathom. Since some other subject can surely associate a different cluster of properties with the name, how are we to describe successful communication? On a rather commonsensical view, a necessary condition of communicating with a subject about Aristotle is ensuring that he has the right object in mind during the conversation. But, according to Cluster Descriptivism, having an object in mind entails deploying a number of descriptions taken to denote Aristotle. Given that the two subjects can deploy different clusters in attempting to think about the Greek philosopher, are we to say that they have different objects in mind? McKinsey certainly seems ready to accept this conclusion, when he states that “a speaker must have an object in mind in the manner defined by [*CD*].”⁹⁵

In spite of these problems, I believe Cluster Descriptivism points in the right direction. In the final chapter, I will try to describe a type of Descriptivism which is built

⁹⁵ Ibid., 194.

around the main assumptions of Cluster Descriptivism, but which also borrows heavily from the following proposal.

2.5.4 Contextualist Descriptivism

This version of Descriptivism has been largely ignored until now, because, when accepted at its face value, it forces one to revise one's conception of the relationship between names and descriptions in a rather drastic way. Contextualist Descriptivism holds that, per each context of a name's use, there is some descriptive material that gives the meaning of a name. What is crucial to the type of Contextualist Descriptivism that I want to argue for is that the possibility that one subject associates with the same name two different descriptions at two contexts of use does not mean that the content of his utterances changed.

Consider the following example. While talking to Henry, Paul hears about a philosopher named "Aristotle" and asks Henry who the philosopher is. Suppose Henry answers "Plato's most famous student." A few minutes later, Michael joins the conversation and, upon hearing the name again, asks the same question. Let us assume that Henry now answers "the teacher of Alexander the Great." Contextualist Descriptivism would say that Henry *literally* said the same thing twice in different contexts.

Note that, although superficially similar to Cluster Descriptivism, Contextualist Descriptivism does not have to hold that, when Henry answered Paul's and Michael's questions, he entertained the same cluster of descriptions. The various descriptions that Henry may be willing to offer are to be taken as presentations of the object, which, when properly understood, should enable Paul or Michael to be in a position to gather the same descriptive material that Henry draws on.

Frege and Russell made what might seem to be similar comments, but their overall philosophical commitments could not have allowed them to entertain this proposal seriously.

Thus, when Frege notes that different subjects do not attach the same sense to the name “Aristotle,” he adds that “[s]o long as the reference remains the same, such variations of sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science and ought not to occur in a perfect language.”⁹⁶ Frege views the phenomenon that provides the basis for Contextualist Descriptivism as an unfortunate accident which stems from using an imperfect language. He could not have accepted that this very phenomenon is central to the functioning of names.

Russell also noticed that

[i]t is, of course, very much a matter of chance which characteristics of a man’s appearance will come into a friend’s mind when he thinks of him; thus the description actually in the friend’s mind is accidental. The essential point is that he knows that the various descriptions all apply to the same entity, in spite of not being acquainted with the entity in question.⁹⁷

We can make the same point by saying that the reason for which the descriptions are treated as being equally appropriate when entertaining a thought about somebody is that they are assumed to denote the same person. However, Russell’s analysis does not sit well with this point because, if the function of a proper name is merely to abbreviate some descriptive material, then a difference in what is abbreviated should lead to a difference in what counts as an abbreviation. The fact that one uses “Aristotle” at various times when verbalizing thoughts about Aristotle would turn out to be sloppiness in using the same string of sounds to abbreviate what, on different occasions, are quite distinct descriptions.

Wittgenstein makes a stronger case in favor of Contextualist Descriptivism, when he discusses the proposal that a use of a name can be associated with various descriptions.

⁹⁶ Frege, “On Sense and Reference,” 176, ft. †

⁹⁷ Russell, “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Description,” 253.

But if I make a statement about Moses, — am I always ready to substitute some *one* of these descriptions for “Moses”? I shall perhaps say: By “Moses” I understand the man who did what the Bible relates of Moses, or at any rate a good deal of it. But how much? Have I decided how much must be proved false for me to give up my proposition as false? Has the name “Moses” got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases? — Is it not the case that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from under me, and vice versa? — Consider another case. When I say “N is dead”, then something like the following may hold for the meaning of the name “N”: I believe that a human being has lived, whom I (1) have seen in such-and-such places, who (2) looked like this (pictures), (3) has done such-and-such things, and (4) bore the name “N” in social life. — Asked what I understand by “N”, I should enumerate all or some of these points, and different ones on different occasions. So my definition of “N” would perhaps be “the man of whom all this is true”. — But if some point now proves false? — Shall I be prepared to declare the proposition “N is dead” false — even if it is only something which strikes me as incidental that has turned out false? But where are the bounds of the incidental? — If I had given a definition of the name in such a case, I should now be ready to alter it.

And this can be expressed like this: I use the name “N” without a *fixed* meaning. (But that detracts as little from its usefulness, as it detracts from that of a table that it stands on four legs instead of three and so sometimes wobbles.)⁹⁸

One might read the above passage as an endorsement of the view that the meaning of names may change from one context of use to another. However, Wittgenstein’s point is not that there is not *one* meaning of a name *n*, but rather that the name is used without a *fixed* meaning.⁹⁹ The idea is, thus, that the name has a meaning, but not one that remains unchanged across various contexts of use. To give another example, when Wittgenstein argues that there is not one single definition of games, phrased in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, he does not argue that the meaning of the word “games” changes along with the context of use, but that the very word “game” does not have a meaning expounded by a sentence of the type “*x* is a game iff...”¹⁰⁰ Applying Wittgenstein’s remarks to Cluster

⁹⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 37^e.

⁹⁹ Wittgenstein may also be taken to argue in favor of Cluster Descriptivism, especially when saying that the meaning of the name “Moses” is the person who did most of what the Bible relates of him. However, Wittgenstein is explicit that the descriptions that one associates with the name may change (“Asked what I understand by “N”, I should enumerate all or some of these points, and different ones on different occasions.”) There is no doubt that there are clusters of descriptions that one uses as props for keeping track of an individual, but, as we saw, they frequently change their composition.

¹⁰⁰ It also seems to me that saying that the meaning of “game” changes with the context exemplifies the very attitude that Wittgenstein argues against. It is motivated by the conviction that one definition may be found for each word - so, when presented with sharply different games, one wishes to maintain the truth of this approach by manufacturing context-sensitive concepts of games that turn out to be homophonous.

Descriptivism yields a view which allows for the composition of a cluster to change across time, without impugning on the identity of the various name tokens whose uses the cluster, in all its guises, supports. Moreover, as the above quote makes it clear, the process of weighing the importance of a description in a cluster depends oftentimes on contextual decisions that lack theoretical uniformity.

To endorse Contextualist Descriptivism is to hold that the meaning of a name remains stable in spite of its being associated with different contextually-available descriptions. It seems to me unlikely that Henry alters the meaning of the name “Aristotle” when he passes on to Michael a description different from the one that he imparted to Paul. Contextualist Descriptivism states only that the description giving the meaning of the name is provided by the context, most of the times by what the subject himself is prepared to say in order to clarify the meaning he attaches to the name. It is a further step to hold that different descriptions entail different meanings. This is trivially true for a Russellian. But I am not a Russellian about definite descriptions and I believe that, when Henry says “Plato’s most famous student was a philosopher,” he is expressing a singular proposition that *he may as well have expressed by saying* “The teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira was a philosopher.” The two utterances express the same proposition, which, for convenience, we may abbreviate as “Aristotle was a philosopher.”

2.6 INCOMPLETE DESCRIPTIONS

Are names the only expressions which can be substituted with different descriptions in the same sentence without altering the proposition expressed? In the remainder of this chapter, I will take a look at incomplete descriptions and argue that they exhibit a similar semantic behavior. Incomplete descriptions pose an obvious problem for the Theory of Descriptions.¹⁰¹ As Strawson noted in “On Referring,” one can utter “The table is covered with books” without stating there is only one table in the world which is covered with books.¹⁰²

Strawson’s example is based on regular uses of the sentence “The table is covered with books,” when it is rather clear that there is one table at the relevant context of communication. However, Russell’s theory can be equally criticized by considering *abnormal* uses of the above sentence. As Murali Ramachandran pointed out, if a use of the sentence “The table is covered with books” were to mean that there is a unique table which is

¹⁰¹ This is not the only charge brought against the Theory of Descriptions. Donnellan argued that Russell had not distinguished between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions (see “Reference and Definite Descriptions” and Kripke’s answer in “Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference”). Strawson, on the other hand, thought that, when a description does not denote, an utterance that uses it is meaningless (see the debate with Russell in Strawson’s “On Referring” and Russell’s “Mr. Strawson on Referring”). In some respects, Strawson’s position is very close to mine. What he regards as giving the meaning of a sentence, i.e., giving “*general directions* for its use in making true or false assertions” (“On Referring,” 327) is simply giving the character of the sentence. The dissimilarity pertains to the question of whether there is content when a singular term is non-denoting. Russell’s theory also states that descriptions are quantificational devices, a view disputed by Delia Graff Fara who holds that they are in fact predicative expressions, whose value is the set of entities the predicate is true of (see Fara “Descriptions as Predicates” and for a criticism of the predicative analysis of descriptions Brogaard “Descriptions: Predicates or Quantifiers?”). Burge in “Reference and Proper Names” also argues that descriptions on predicative position are predicates, having the value “being called *n*.” However, when occurring on the subject position, they play the role of “this individual called *n*” (see Boër, “Proper Names as Predicates,” for criticism of Burge’s position and Hornsby “Proper Names” for a defense). Russell’s theory has also been criticized for including the uniqueness condition in the semantic analysis of definite descriptions. Szabó, for instance, argues that definite and indefinite descriptions are semantically identical and that the uniqueness condition is only pragmatically implicated because definite descriptions are often associated with familiar discourse referents (see the debate with Abbott in Szabó, “Descriptions and Uniqueness” and “Definite Descriptions without Uniqueness,” and Abbott, “A Reply to Szabó”). My criticism of Szabó’s examples is that they make heavy use of the notion of completely indistinguishable objects in circumstances where it is easy to imagine how one can introduce additional criteria that discriminate them. To work with one of Szabó’s example, suppose that Watson looks at a pile of broken glass on the floor and forms the notion that it all came from one glass (“The Loss of Uniqueness,” 1197). A more perceptive Sherlock, noticing that there are simply too many shards, might say “The fact that a glass broke last night is already significant. But the fact that the pieces of *the glass* are all mixed up with the pieces of another one completely indiscernible from the first is truly remarkable.” However, it is not clear from this example why Watson cannot pick a shard up and insist “I mean the glass that *this* was a part of.”

¹⁰² Strawson, “On Referring,” 332.

covered with books, then we should understand one who utters it, even if it is common knowledge that one does not have any particular table in mind and that there is no contextually salient table either.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, it is arguable if we would find such utterance meaningful. (“Which table do you have in mind?”, “No one, in particular,” “Do you want to state something true about our surroundings?”, “Yes,” “But there are many tables here,” “Quite so, indeed.”) Yet, according to the truth conditions assigned by a Russellian analysis, what was said was false, although intelligible. Its meaningfulness should be that of any other false sentence.

One obvious reply to Strawson’s criticism is to say that the incomplete description is used as an ellipsis for an identifying mass of information. On one variation of this kind of reply, we could say with Sellars that the ellipsis contains a contextually-sensitive particle.¹⁰⁴ An utterance of “The table is covered with books” means that the table *over there* is covered with books, where determining the value of the indexical amounts to identifying spatially the table. However, it seems to me that one can utter the above sentence without supposing that one is able to identify demonstratively the relevant table. Suppose that one learns that a table was moved in the room he is located, and, yet, due to the fact that he suffers from severe hallucinations, he is unwilling to state that he can identify demonstratively the table. I believe that he would still be able to use the incomplete description, even if he lacked the means to locate correctly the table in the room.

A simple way to fix the problem is to say that the context can restrict the domain of quantification.¹⁰⁵ The description, then, picks out the only table from the contextually

¹⁰³ Ramachandran, “A Strawsonian Objection.” See Bach “Ramachandran vs. Russell” for a reply to this line of criticism. Bach thinks that the utterance is unintelligible on pragmatic grounds, because one could not be taken to state either a singular or uniqueness proposition (185). But, as Ramachandran notes (“Bach on behalf of Russell,” 285-286), this is insufficient. An utterance of “It is not the case that the table is covered with books”, made in a similar circumstance, would be equally opaque, although the subject can, this time, be taken to mean that it is not true that there is a unique table which is covered with books.

¹⁰⁴ Sellars, “Presupposing,” 200.

¹⁰⁵ See Stanley and Szabó, “On Quantifier Domain Restriction”.

relevant domain. We should note, however, that different contexts may yield the same intended denotation. If Henry says “The table is covered with books,” one can take the context to be partially determined by the objects in the part of the room that Henry is looking at, or the objects in the entire room, or those in the entire apartment, and so on. Since different contexts trigger a difference in what is said, we should conclude that there are many available propositions for one single utterance. But the utterance itself is not ambiguous.

The above argument is essentially a reworking of Keith Donnellan’s and Howard Wettstein’s arguments that incomplete definite descriptions are used referentially to express singular propositions.¹⁰⁶ There are many distinct ways in which one could complete the description “the table” and each of them would amount to different propositions expressed by an utterance of “The table is covered with books.”¹⁰⁷ One can complete the description, by saying “The table in Room 215” or “The table at which the author of *The Persistence of Objects* is sitting at t_1 .” Moreover, the subject himself would not be able to choose one description over the other available ones. Wettstein infers from this data that the context provides only the object denoted by the description, in the same way in which the context completes a use of a demonstrative.¹⁰⁸

One possible reply to this argument is to hold with Salmon that, if the above analysis were true, then the sentence “The murderer is insane,” where the description is used to talk about Jones, would communicate the singular proposition that Jones is insane, which would be true at a world where there are no murderers, but where Jones is deranged.¹⁰⁹ Salmon’s point loses its force, though, if one realizes that, although the sentence “The murderer is

¹⁰⁶ Donnellan, “Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again,” 204, Howard K. Wettstein, “Demonstrative Reference and Definite Descriptions.”

¹⁰⁷ Wettstein, “Demonstrative Reference and Definite Descriptions,” 245.

¹⁰⁸ Saul Kripke, “Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference,” 6-7 and 22 is also inclined to treat incomplete descriptions as complex demonstratives.

¹⁰⁹ Salmon, “Assertion and Incomplete Definite Descriptions.”

insane,” used at that world, is false, the same sentence *used here* would still be true under the counterfactual circumstances imagined by Salmon.¹¹⁰

Facing Wettstein’s argument, defenders of Russell’s analysis of definite descriptions can bite the bullet in two ways. First, one can follow Schiffer and Blackburn in arguing that, when an incomplete description is used, there is no single proposition expressed, but only a vague class of propositions determined by the possible completions of the description.¹¹¹ Second, one may take a more radical line and hold with Buchanan and Ostertag that no proposition was expressed.¹¹² Rather, the linguistic meaning of “The *F* is *G*,” where the description is incomplete, is similar to a propositional template or blueprint of the form

[the *x*: *Fx* & *_x*] (*Gx*),

such that a speaker understands an utterance of the above sentence if he knows that he has to produce a completion of the template with a contextually available property.¹¹³

Because I believe that intending to refer is always determinate, I disagree with the Schiffer-Blackburn indeterminacy approach. I do think, however, that there is something partially correct in Buchanan’ and Ostertag’s explanation. What I think is correct is that any proposition obtained by plugging in a contextually appropriate property in the empty slot of the template can count as comprehending the utterance. What I think is incorrect is that the various propositions thus obtained are different.

¹¹⁰ Wettstein, “The Semantic Significance of the Referential-Attributive Distinction,” 188. Salmon also criticizes Wettstein for committing a pragmatic fallacy, namely inferring conclusions about semantic content from the speaker’s assertion (“The Pragmatic Fallacy”). See also Reimer, “The Wettstein/Salmon Debate: Critique and Resolution” for an overview of the debate, sympathetic to Wettstein’s claims.

¹¹¹ Schiffer, “Descriptions, Indexicals, and Belief Reports: Some Dilemmas (But not the Ones You Expect),” Blackburn, “Wettstein on Definite Descriptions,” 271.

¹¹² Buchanan and Ostertag, “Has the Problem of Incompleteness Rested on a Mistake.”

¹¹³ Bach, “You Don’t Say?” and Neale, “This, That, and the Other.”

Incomplete descriptions are theoretically interesting because it does not matter how one comes to identify the object denoted, as long as one thinks of the right object. This means that understanding an utterance involving an incomplete description implies understanding which object one has in mind. This is the hallmark of singular propositions and this is also the reason why I hold that the possible completions communicate the same (singular) proposition, in spite of contributing distinct concepts.

CHAPTER 3 – KRIPKE

3.1 MARCUS ON NAMES AS TAGS

Both Frege and Russell maintained that ordinary proper names and definite descriptions are semantic cognates. This general thesis should be accepted while bearing in mind the disagreements that separate the two philosophers.¹¹⁴ Frege thought that each name is endowed with a sense. Russell defended the view that only ordinary proper names are truncated definite descriptions. Genuine proper names are mere tags for their referents. They cannot be understood without knowing what they stand for. Frege believed that both names and definite descriptions are singular terms. Russell held that only logically proper names are singular terms. In Russell's theory, Frege's distinction between sense and reference is inapplicable. A logically proper name has a sole semantic value: its referent. Other apparently singular terms, such as ordinary proper names and definite descriptions, are to be analyzed away via the contextual definitions provided in *Principia Mathematica*.

I previously mentioned that the idea that Frege is a Descriptivist has come under sustained attack from philosophers such as Dummett, McDowell, and Evans. It seems to me that this sort of opposition is mainly due to the fact that Descriptivism is instinctively interpreted as being synonymous with Russell's brand of Descriptivism, the result being that a host of distinctions that seem vital to Frege's thought cannot be adequately explained if descriptions are to be analyzed away à la Russell. However, I see no reason to prejudge that Russell's theory is the default option for a Descriptivist. The following appears to be a neutral way of stating the Descriptivist tenet, without implying anything that Frege himself would have found objectionable:

¹¹⁴ See Bach, "Comparing Frege and Russell," for a more detailed analysis of the differences between the two philosophers.

(D) The contribution made by an ordinary proper name to the content expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing the name is that of a definite description.

I should point out that the notion of “content of an utterance” is meant to be taken in the most liberal way, without assuming either the Intuitive Criterion of Difference for thoughts or Russell’s conception that the essential function of a sentence is to encode information about the world. Similarly, I speak about the contribution of a name or a definite description without making any preliminary theoretical commitments. It is consistent with (D) to say, for instance, that both a name and a definite description contribute an object at the level of the reference (*Bedeutung*) of the utterance where they are used and a qualitative complex at the level of the thought (*Gedanke*) expressed by the same utterance. Conversely, it is allowed by (D) to reject any distinction between sense and reference, assume a Russellian view of propositions, and claim that both ordinary proper names and definite descriptions contribute the same type of propositional constituents.

We can anticipate the criticism that Descriptivism has been subjected to by Kripke if we couch the theory in terms of Carnapian intensions. Frege’s idea that all expressions have a sense that determines a reference becomes in Carnap’s *Meaning and Necessity* the thesis that, for each expression, there is a function which assigns an extension to the expression at each state-description. A state-description contains for each sentence p either p or $\sim p$ and can be viewed as a precursor of the contemporary notion of a possible world.¹¹⁵ A Carnapian intension for a sentence such as “Henry reads philosophy” is the function that assigns to each state-description a truth-value. Intuitively, it is the function which tells us in which world the sentence is true. Two sentences p and q are intensionally equivalent iff the sentence “ $p \equiv q$ ” is L -true, that is if it is true in every state-description.

¹¹⁵ It is not exactly the current notion, because, unlike possible worlds, the identity and number of state-descriptions are determined by the language in which they are couched.

According to Carnap, then, each linguistic entity can be analyzed in terms of the distinction between intension and extension. But is this principle valid when applied to the case of proper names? Ruth Barcan Marcus argued that endowing names with an intension speaks more of a theoretical bias, rather than of a solution to a real explanatory gap:

Every term (or name) must, according to Carnap, have a dual role. To me it seems unnecessary and does proliferate entities unnecessarily.... And to speak of the intension named by a proper name strikes one immediately as a distortion for the sake of symmetry.¹¹⁶

Names, Marcus insisted, are mere tags. Their function, unlike that of descriptions, is only to label the referent. “To give a thing a proper name is different from giving a unique description.”¹¹⁷ A description conveys information and can denote only insofar as there is an object exemplifying the properties mentioned in the description. A name, on the other hand, may be likened to a randomly assigned number whose only purpose is to tag. “This tag, a proper name, has no meaning. It simply tags. It is not strongly equatable with any of the singular descriptions of the thing...”¹¹⁸ Unlike describing, tagging is a direct relation between a name and its referent. Marcus was in effect propounding a direct reference theory of names.

Because the only semantic function of a name is to label an object, if an identity statement between two names is true, then it is necessarily true.¹¹⁹ Since the statement is true, it follows that the two names actually tag the same object. But since tagging is not describing, once it is established that the two names label the same object, it does not matter in which world we evaluate next the truth of the identity sentence. It is of no consequence for our inquiry the way in which the actual course of events may be altered, because these changes can only affect phrases that denote in virtue of an object’s satisfying certain properties. The

¹¹⁶ Marcus, “Discussion on the Paper of Ruth B. Marcus,” 138.

¹¹⁷ Marcus, “Modalities and Intensional Languages,” 309.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 310.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 307.

qualitative distinction between this world, where the identity is established, and any other possible world is irrelevant to the truth of the identity statement. The names would still tag the same object, no matter how we chose to vary the history of our world.

Much has been made of the fact that Kripke attended the colloquium talk “Modalities and Intensional Languages.” Quentin Smith in effect argued that Kripke had misunderstood Marcus’ points, forgotten about the lecture, and later presented identical arguments in the Princeton lectures that would be published as “Naming and Necessity.”¹²⁰ In his reading, the modal and epistemic arguments, the idea that there are *a posteriori* necessary truths, and the claim that names are directly referential were all assertions made by Marcus at the conference where Kripke was present. This claim triggered a strong reply from Soames and a detailed criticism from Burgess.¹²¹

The replies focus mainly on the fact that Marcus’ distinction between names and descriptions was anticipated by other philosophers, that her comments are too brief, that Marcus speaks only of names in a symbolic language, and that no other philosopher, prior to Kripke, operated with the notion of rigid designation. I do not wish to cover this debate at length. I do want to point out, however, that, although philosophical premonitions can be found in many places with enough patience, there is significantly more in common between Marcus’ position and Kripke’s than there is between, say, Smullyan’s arguments and Kripke’s. Similarly, when Marcus states that

it is not an empirical fact that
(17) Venus *I* Venus

and if “*a*” is another proper name for Venus
(18) Venus *I a*¹²²,

¹²⁰ Smith, “Marcus, Kripke, and the Origin of the New Theory of Reference.”

¹²¹ Soames, “Revisionism about Reference” and Burgess, “Marcus, Kripke, and Names.”

¹²² Marcus, “Modalities and Intensional Languages,” 310.

it is evident that she speaks of an ordinary proper name.

However, Marcus' proposal did lack the concept of a referent of a term at a world, which is a central notion in modal semantics.¹²³ The idea that something can be a rigid designator is that it has the same referent at any world. The distinction allows for a characterization of the semantic function of a term in a way that skirts epistemological questions. The distinction between what is metaphysically necessary and what is epistemically so is central to Kripke's arguments in "Naming and Necessity." It is not certain that Marcus distinguished so sharply between the two categories. Witness the following quote. Marcus' comment that

if a single object had more than one tag, there would be a way of finding out such as having recourse to a dictionary or some analogous inquiry, which would resolve the question as to whether the two tags denote the same thing¹²⁴

suggests that she held that the truth of an identity statement between two names can be justified on the basis of linguistic evidence.

3.2 SEMANTICS FOR MODAL FIRST-ORDER PREDICATE LOGIC AND THE MODAL ARGUMENT

In order to introduce the modal argument, it is necessary to set up a minimal semantic apparatus for modal first-order predicate logic. Think of possible worlds as ways things might have been. In talking about possible worlds, I shall keep any metaphysical assumptions at a minimum. That is, I shall switch back and forth between "Possibly, p " and "There is a possible world where it is the case that p ," but I shall remain agnostic about what is meant by the phrase "there is a possible world."

¹²³ Soames, "Revisionism about Reference," 203.

¹²⁴ Marcus, "Discussion on the Paper of Ruth Barcan Marcus," 142.

Let W be a non-empty set of possible worlds and R be a binary relation on W , which we will call “the accessibility relation.” If two worlds in W , say w_1 and w_2 , are such that Rw_1w_2 , then we will say that w_1 is accessible from w_2 . The set of worlds that are accessible from a given world w_1 are the worlds which are relevant for assessing the truth of a sentence containing a modal operator at w_1 . A sentence of the form $\Diamond A$ is true at w_1 iff A is true with respect to at least a world accessible from w_1 . Similarly, $\Box A$ is true at w_1 iff A is true with respect to all worlds accessible from w_1 . This means that the simple fact that A is true at some world w_2 does not in itself show that $\Diamond A$ is true at w_1 . For this to happen, we also have to assume that w_2 is accessible from w_1 . To give an example, suppose we interpret modalities as nomologic modalities, i.e., what is necessary or possible according to the laws of nature. In this case, we will say that, if w_2 is accessible from w_1 , then w_2 represents from the standpoint of w_1 a way in which things might have gone if the laws of nature that are the case at w_1 had been respected.

I will assume throughout this thesis an interpretation of the accessibility relation that is specific to $S5$: the accessibility relation is an equivalence relation or, more informally, every world is accessible from every other world. Aside from W , the set of worlds, and R , the accessibility relation, we will also take into account with a domain of individuals. The choice of defining this domain will influence the interpretation we give to quantifiers. If we assume only one domain of individuals, then we quantify over all individuals that exist at some world or another. The ensuing semantics is constant domains or possibilist semantics because quantifiers are thought of as ranging over the entire domain of possible entities. However, if one is suspicious about the notion of quantifying over possibilia, then one can operate with a set of domains of individuals, such that each domain is associated with one world (the domain is the set of individuals that exist at that particular world). This style of semantics is known as varying domains or actualist semantics.

Let us assume, for the sake of simplicity, a possibilist semantics.¹²⁵ A first-order model is a structure $\langle W, R, D, I \rangle$, where I is an interpretation that assigns to each n -place predicate letter P a function from W to subsets of D^n , that is, the interpretation assigns to each n -place predicate letter a set of n -tuples at each world. Think of the assignment as the extension of P at each world (the set of objects which are P at that world). The interpretation I also assigns to each constant a member of the domain D . Think of this assignment as clarifying what individual each constant stands for.

To accommodate the interpretation of open formulae, let us define a first-order valuation as a total function that assigns to each variable a member of the domain D . An open formula such as Fx may be read in ordinary language as “It is F .” Think now of the first-order valuation as assuming that this sentence was uttered in the presence of a , such that the meaning of Fx in this context is that a is F . A first-order valuation u is an x -variant of valuation v iff u and v agree on all variable assignments except at most x .

Now we can define truth at a world w with respect to a model $M = \langle W, R, D, I \rangle$ and a first order valuation v as follows, where $P(x_1, \dots, x_n)$ is an atomic formula:

$$M, w \models_v P(x_1, \dots, x_n) \Leftrightarrow \langle v(x_1), \dots, v(x_n) \rangle \in I(P, w)$$

$$M, w \models_v X \& Y \Leftrightarrow M, w \models_v X \text{ and } M, w \models_v Y$$

$$M, w \models_v \sim X \Leftrightarrow \text{it is not true that } M, w \models_v X$$

$$M, w \models_v \Box X \Leftrightarrow M, \Delta \models_v X \text{ for every world } \Delta \text{ in } W \text{ (remember, we assume } S5)$$

$$M, w \models_v \Diamond X \Leftrightarrow M, \Delta \models_v X \text{ for at least one world } \Delta \text{ in } W$$

$$M, w \models_v \forall x X \Leftrightarrow M, w \models_u X \text{ for every } x\text{-variant } u \text{ of } v$$

$$M, w \models_v \exists x X \Leftrightarrow M, w \models_u X \text{ for some } x\text{-variant } u \text{ of } v$$

¹²⁵ See also Hughes and Creswell, *A New Introduction to Modal Logic* or Fitting and Mendelsohn, *First-Order Modal Logic*.

Let us note one important feature of this semantic apparatus. Unlike the interpretation for predicate letters, the interpretation of names and free variables is not world-dependent. The same predicate may be assigned different extensions at different worlds. In contrast, once names and free variables are assigned individuals in D , they keep designating the same referents at all worlds. In Kripke's words, names and variables under assignment are rigid designators.

This result is built in the specification of the above semantics for a formal language. But are natural languages similar to modal first-order predicate logic in this respect? One of Kripke's enduring contributions to philosophical analysis was to argue that ordinary proper names should also be counted as rigid. A name, such as "Aristotle," is meant to refer to the same individual at all possible worlds.

In order to understand Kripke's claim correctly, we have to attend carefully to the use-mention distinction. Saying that, at a world w_I , the name "Aristotle" refers to the same individual as the individual actually referred to does not mean that in w_I Aristotle bears the same name. There are many worlds where Aristotle has a different name or no name at all. The purport of the rigid designation thesis for proper names is not to state something about possible naming practices, about how in a different situation we might have referred to Aristotle. It is a thesis about the language that we currently speak.¹²⁶

The fact that, unlike names, definite descriptions in natural languages are not usually rigid is established by what Kripke calls "the intuitive test": "although someone other than the U.S. President in 1970 might have been the U.S. President in 1970 (e.g., Humphrey might have been), no one other than Nixon might have been Nixon."¹²⁷

In general, if an expression E is such that it is meaningful to ask whether E might not have been E , then E is not rigid. This leads to the modal argument:

¹²⁶ See also McKinsey, "Against a Defence of Cluster Theories."

¹²⁷ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 48.

1. Ordinary proper names are rigid designators.
2. Definite descriptions ordinarily associated by speakers with proper names are not rigid.
3. If Descriptivism is correct, then the contribution made by a proper name to the proposition expressed by a sentence containing the name is that of a definite description.
4. For any name *n* and its associated description *the D*, at a world where the following are true:
 - a. *n* is not the *D*,
 - b. the *D* is not *F*,
 - c. *n* is *F*,
 the sentence “*n* is *F*” is true, while the sentence “The *D* is *F*” is not true.
5. If two sentences do not have the same truth value at each possible world, then they express different propositions.
6. Therefore, the sentences “*n* is *F*” and “The *D* is *F*” express different propositions.
7. Therefore, Descriptivism is false.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ I reconstructed the argument. Kripke targets in Lecture I the claim that “If *n* exists, then *n* has most of *φ*’s” expresses a necessary truth in the idiolect of the speaker. I prefer the above way of reconstructing the argument because it makes more visible the options available for countering the modal argument.

3.3 WHY ARE PROPER NAMES RIGID?

Although the modal argument is a formidable attack on Descriptivism, it still leaves room for Descriptivists to reformulate their tenet so as to evade its conclusion. Descriptivists can choose to deny premise 2 and argue that, appearances notwithstanding, descriptions used to give the meaning of proper names are indeed rigid. The descriptions that are usually referenced in connection with this reply are descriptions rigidified by the operator “actually” or by the Kaplanian operator *dthat*. I shall call the resulting version of Descriptivism “Rigidified Descriptivism” and analyze it in Chapter 5 of the thesis.

Another way to counter the modal argument is to deny premise 5. Drawing on the Dummettian distinction between assertoric and ingredient contents, Jason Stanley argued that the modal argument establishes only that the sentences “*n* is *F*” and “The *D* is *F*” have different ingredient senses. Because Stanley takes the assertoric content of “The *D* is *F*” as being identical to that of “The actual *D* is *F*,” I shall examine his views also in Chapter 5.¹²⁹

Finally, one can reject premise 4 and argue that, again appearances notwithstanding, the proposition that the *D* is *F* is not false at a world where conditions *a*, *b*, and *c* are met. The gist of this reply is to say that the description used to give the meaning of a name always takes widest scope relative to modal operators, so that the sentence “At *w*, the *D* is *F*” expresses the proposition that the (actual) *D* is such that at *w* it is *F*. I will keep to the established usage and call this version of Descriptivism “Widescopism.” Widescopism will be the topic of the next chapter.

The modal argument is based on the idea that names, unlike ordinary definite descriptions used to identify an individual, are rigid. However, rigidity itself is not a criterion for distinguishing between names and descriptions. As Kripke himself acknowledges, there

¹²⁹ This is not to say that denying premise 5 amounts to denying premise 2. Unlike a supporter of Rigidified Descriptivism, Stanley accepts that there is a type of content in regard to which proper names and definite descriptions differ.

are descriptions which always pick up the same individual with respect to all worlds.¹³⁰ For example, the description “the smallest prime” designates at all worlds the number 2. What is, then, the source of rigidity that is specific to proper names?

Kripke attempts to clarify the difference by introducing the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* rigid designators. While descriptions, such as the above, are only *de facto* rigid, names are *de jure* rigid because their “reference ... is *stipulated* to be a single object.”¹³¹ Names are rigid since they are expressly introduced to track the same object across different worlds. The convention that makes the name tag its referent is the only guide in determining what the name refers to. In opposition to names, definite descriptions denote on the basis of both linguistic conventions that associate predicate words with properties and how the world is, i.e., which object uniquely exemplifies the properties. The denotation of a description at a world is a function of linguistic rules and objective facts.

This leads to one possible way of explaining why names are rigid, namely, that they are completely arbitrary marks which cannot be understood in the absence of understanding what they stand for. The arbitrariness thesis is endorsed by Michael Pendlebury who states

A proper name, after all, is nothing but a singular term which has been *assigned* to its bearer (i.e., its denotation in the actual world) *by fiat* (or which, from the perspective of language users, might as well have been so assigned).¹³²

Names are semantically unstructured in that their semantics is fixed by decree-like rules such as “This object shall be named ‘Neptune.’” It is important to note that this feature supersedes any other apparently descriptive features of the name. Nicknames provide a familiar category of names whose introduction is justified on descriptive grounds, e.g., one is nicknamed “Shorty” because of its stature. Nonetheless, as Pendlebury makes it clear,

¹³⁰ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 21, ft. 21.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Pendlebury, “Why Proper Names are Rigid Designators?,” 520.

“Shorty” might have been introduced by fiat, irrespective of the height of the bearer of the name.

I doubt whether this is a good explanation. The idea that names are arbitrary marks invites the comment that they might have been assigned to other individuals. Indeed, the reason why a name is rigid, in this account, is because the fiat gives its meaning. There is no reason why the name might have not been attached to another individual. There is no descriptive constraint to prevent the name from being used to tag another object. The name “Aristotle”, *this* name, is of a famous philosopher because one decided a long time ago to use it in order to speak about the philosopher.¹³³ The name might have been attached to the philosopher’s son or to some other individual at random.

Pendlebury infers from this that, if a name has a determinate denotation, then it has the denotation provided at the actual world. The idea is that names rigidly refer to the same object because, due to their arbitrary character, we can only interpret them according to the actual semantic conventions. Thus, considering a world defined by the counterfactual “If Hitler had invaded England in 1940, then Churchill would not have been Prime Minister in 1945,” Pendlebury argues that

it seems to me quite clear that *if* the name ‘Hitler’ or the name ‘Churchill’ has a determinate denotation in the situation specified by the antecedent of [the above counterfactual], *then* it must have the same denotation in that situation as it has in the actual world. After all, no *other* denotation has been specified, and – given that it is arbitrary – what could the name itself contribute towards the specification of the situation other than its denotation? Thus ... we must either treat the name ‘Churchill’ as having no denotation in that situation, or treat it as denoting the same man in that situation as it denotes in the actual world.¹³⁴

Upon hearing “Hitler might have invaded England in 1940,” we have to make a choice, given that the name “Hitler” is a mark arbitrarily attached to an object. We can either plead

¹³³ Actually, its translation. Ancient Greeks did not refer to Aristotle by uttering “Aristotle”.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 530.

ignorance and say that we do not know which object the name labels, or we can assume that it has a denotation fixed by the current rules.

It seems clear to me that we do not interpret sentences in this way. If one insisted that the name might have been attached to another individual, I believe the proper answer would be “Well, you mean the same syntactically defined name, i.e., the same string of letters, but not the same name in the semantic sense.”

Pendlebury endorses in fact the idea that any name might have been attached to an object other than its actual referent, while stating that “it is an error to suppose that the denotation of a given use of a name is constitutive of that use.”¹³⁵ Consider a counterfactual situation *S* in which Bertrand Russell is furtively exchanged with another child prior to his parents’ bestowing upon him the name “Bertrand Russell” such that the child has the same life that the actual philosopher had. Pendlebury claims that he “can find no reason to say that Russell’s parents’ use of the name ‘Bertrand’ in *S* is different from their use of it in the actual world ...”¹³⁶

The resulting analysis of names has very few similarities with Kripke’s original view. I believe that, even if all the above are known, if one heard “At *S*, Bertrand Russell is wise,” one would be of the opinion that the sentence is ambiguous in that it may express either the proposition that Bertrand Russell is wise in *S* or the distinct proposition that the child described above is wise in *S*.¹³⁷

A different way to account for the rigidity of names is to say that rigidity is a consequence of the fact that names are directly referential terms. It should be noted that

¹³⁵ Ibid., 533.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 535.

¹³⁷ The details of Pendlebury’s analysis are also unclear. Thus, he endorses an anaphoric account, according to which two uses of a name are connected much in the same way in which two anaphoric uses of a pronoun are connected. Pendlebury notes (536) that this implies that the use of a token of a name is thereby fixed by anaphoric relations (the token must designate whatever the first token originally designated) and acknowledges that this threatens the arbitrariness thesis. He attempts to solve the problem by arguing that the arbitrariness thesis still applies to the original token of the use of the name. However, he does not note that this calls into question his statement that Russell’s parents in *S* engage in the same use of the name “Bertrand” as in the actual world, since they manifestly do not use the name in *S* in order to refer to the name’s actual reference.

Kripke himself appears to explain the fundamental difference between *de jure* and *de dicto* designators as one between designators that refer directly to their referents and designators that denote through a complex of properties, when saying

π is supposed to be the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. Now, it's something that I have nothing but a vague intuitive feeling to argue for: It seems to me that here this Greek letter is not being used as *short for* the phrase "the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter" nor is it even used as short for a cluster of alternative definitions of π , whatever that might mean. It is used as a *name* for a real number, which in this case is necessarily the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter.¹³⁸

It is easy to read Kripke as saying that the difference between π and the associated description is that the first names (directly) a number, whereas the second denotes the number because it is the only mathematical entity which satisfies the descriptive material. This is in fact the position adopted by Almog, McGinn, and Smith: names are rigid designators *because* they are directly referential terms.¹³⁹

This interpretation has the additional advantage that it also clarifies how negative existentials can be true at given possible worlds. While commenting on the rigidity thesis, Kripke states that "a designator rigidly designates a certain object if it designates that object wherever the object exists; if, in addition, the object is a necessary existent, the designator can be called *strongly rigid*."¹⁴⁰ The distinction between weakly and strongly rigid designators is meant to show that rigidity does not imply that the referent of a name has to exist at all worlds. However, the question still remains "To what does the name refer with respect to a world where it is stipulated that the name's referent does not exist?" Kripke's answer is that the name refers to its actual referent: "If you say 'suppose Hitler had never

¹³⁸ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 60.

¹³⁹ Almog, "Naming without Necessity," McGinn, "Rigid Designation and Semantic Value," and Smith, "Semantical Considerations on Rigid Designation" and "Rigidity and Scope."

¹⁴⁰ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 49.

been born' then 'Hitler' refers here, still rigidly, to something that would not exist in the counterfactual situation described.”¹⁴¹

It seems natural, then, to distinguish with Salmon between persistently rigid designators, i.e., phrases which designate the same thing at those worlds where the designated individuals exist and nothing at the worlds where the designated objects do not exist, and obstinately rigid designators, i.e., phrases which designate the same thing at all worlds, irrespective of whether the designated objects exist in those worlds or not.¹⁴² If names are directly referential terms, then they contribute their referents to the propositions expressed by their use. A sentence such as “Hitler does not exist” expresses a proposition comprising an individual and the property of existing and is true at a world iff the individual included in the proposition does not have the property of existing at the world of evaluation.

In order to avoid circularity, this account of rigidity must thoroughly remove any modal element from the explanation of direct reference. Failure to do so will encourage a comparison between names and definite descriptions in terms of their behavior when embedded in modal sentences and the door will be again open to look for descriptions that mimic that behavior of names in modal contexts.

However, this separation is not always as clear as it should be. Witness Smith's argument in “Rigidity and Scope” to the effect that names are purely referential terms. Smith attempts there to counter Dummett's reply to the modal argument, according to which asking what the truth value of the proposition *p* at some possible world is turns out to be a sloppy way of asking what the truth value of the sentence “Possibly *p*” is at the actual world. Smith's idea is that the notion of pure referentiality can be a good test for distinguishing between names and definite descriptions, because asking what a term contributes to a proposition does not have to involve talk of modalities.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., , 78.

¹⁴² Salmon, *Reference and Essence*, 33-34.

In order to establish this, Smith imagines a language L_0 which contains no modal operators. Smith finds it obvious that the speakers of L_0 can distinguish between names and definite descriptions, even in the absence of modal notions, and considers the denial of the possibility that languages, such as L_0 , exist “implausible.”

What is distinctive about any kind of definite description as contrasted with any ordinary name is that the former, unlike the latter, expresses, in virtue of its meaning, a descriptive condition to be met by a designatum. It is this relation between a definite descriptive expression and a descriptive condition that is genuinely semantic. The relation of designation between such an expression and an item in the world is, in contrast, not purely semantic. For definite descriptions of themselves do not determine the relation of designation to an item: it is also, in part, determined by the facts of the world.¹⁴³

Unlike definite descriptions, names designate only on the basis of semantic conventions:

“Things are quite otherwise with proper names. It is a genuinely semantic fact about the name ‘Aristotle’ that it designates; or, more precisely, *names* the particular individual Aristotle.”¹⁴⁴

Yet this account cannot explain clearly why a description cannot *name* an individual, if the individual satisfies the descriptive material. If we accept Smith’s proposal and agree that we can have an idea of something which names an individual, why cannot we accept that we have the related idea of something which names an individual, provided it satisfies certain conditions? It is here, I believe, where Smith’s account becomes unclear. Thus, when analyzing the nature of definite descriptions, he says that “[i]f things had gone differently that expression would have designated a different individual (or none) *while its meaning would remain unchanged*,”¹⁴⁵ while later on, building on the idea that names are purely referential, he adds that “[s]uch a name [i.e., Aristotle] could not have a different referent without having

¹⁴³ Smith, “Rigidity and Scope,” 189.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 190.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 189. Italics in original.

changed in meaning.”¹⁴⁶ Since both explanations are couched in modal jargon, they contradict directly the statement that

[w]e are now able to see how speakers of L_0 could distinguish between names and definite descriptions in their language, even though they lack a grasp of modal notions. And this is because one does not need modal notions in order to distinguish between the pure referentiality of the name-bearer relation and any satisfaction-type relation.¹⁴⁷

This kind of difficulty is not specific to Smith’s position. The account under review wants to separate neatly between what a name contributes to the proposition expressed and the behavior of the name in modal contexts. In Almog’s words, it wants to define naming without necessity. Naming involves assigning a referent to a name. This step, which Almog calls the “generation stage,” is a pre-semantic process.¹⁴⁸ It involves “building” a proposition by assigning universals to predicate letters and individuals to names. The second step, the evaluation stage, assesses the proposition at the relevant semantic indices (worlds, moments, places, etc.) In this interpretation, Kripke failed to distinguish between the two stages of semantic evaluation and wanted to ground the difference between names and definite descriptions in a difference at the evaluation stage. However, the genuine difference between names and definite descriptions becomes salient only when we focus on the constituents they contribute to the propositions expressed.

This type of proposal faces two major difficulties. The first is that we are required to comprehend the notion of a proposition in the absence of its semantic evaluation. In Almog’s words,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 190.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Almog, “Naming without Necessity,” 220.

the proposition is generated *before* it is evaluated. We cannot evaluate what we do not have: only after the proposition gets off the ground can we go on to evaluate *it*, find its truth value, in various loci of evaluation.¹⁴⁹

Almog's analysis requires us to be able to form a notion of the proposition expressed without evaluating it at *any* world, the actual one included here as well. This, I submit, is an endeavor doomed to fail. Almog thinks of propositions as of ordinary objects: you can understand what they are if one tells you what they are made of. However, the notion of an individual is inescapably related to the metaphysical category of substance, of something that endures through change or, to recast it in modal terms, *that would have stayed the same, had it had other properties*. Almog wants us to be able to think of a name's referent as a pre-semantic assignment of a value to the name. Yet the very notion that he operates with cannot be extricated from modal discourse.

The second difficulty raised by this proposal is that it is not clear any longer why we should accept the view that the semantic value of a name is not, after all, that of a definite description. If the only thing that we deal with at the generation stage is the actual world, then worries that initially buttressed Descriptivism are bound to return. Names seem meaningful even if they are empty. Frege's puzzle appears to show that there are reasons to consider tying the analysis of names to that of the concepts we associate with their referents. Finally, denying that Aristotle exists should not commit us to a view of existence that treats it as a property on the same level with being red or having a round shape. The modal argument did counter all these worries by showing that there are fundamental differences between the modal profile of a proposition expressed by using a name in a sentence and that expressed by using a definite description. Yet in rejecting modal considerations, the proposal under review loses this edge over Descriptivism.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 220.

I should add one final thought regarding rigidity. I am skeptical that one can give a purely semantic analysis of rigidity. In my view, the fact that names are rigid is a consequence of the fact that they stand for the metaphysical category of substance. The reason why “Aristotle” refers only to one individual across any possible world is because we use this name to speak about an individual substance which is assumed to endure through space, time, and possible worlds. Rigidity is but a reflection at the linguistic level of the process of deploying the transcendental category of substance.

3.4 THE SEMANTIC ARGUMENT

The modal argument has understandably received the most attention from defenders of Descriptivism. However, Kripke has offered additional reasons for rejecting this view and, in the remainder of this chapter, I want to take a look at them. Descriptivism entails two distinct theses about the connection between a name and its associated description. The first is that, per each user of a name, the user can provide (at least) a definite description that endows the name with meaning. The second is that the referent of the name is the denotation of the description. Kripke argued that both theses are incorrect. I shall argue that Kripke’s arguments can be replied to by a Descriptivist.

Consider the first thesis. Are we not many times in the situation of being unable to state anything uniquely true of the referent of a name? Many people possess no identifying knowledge of Cicero. If asked, they would most likely answer “Cicero is some famous Roman orator.” Similarly, the only knowledge that many speakers of English have of Richard Feynman is that he was a physicist.¹⁵⁰ Descriptivism seems to paint, then, an unlikely image of how we succeed in referring to individuals.

¹⁵⁰ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 81.

The second Descriptivist thesis identifies the referent of a name for a given subject with the denotation of the definite description associated by the subject with the name. Note, however, that we do not always possess information which correctly describes the name's referent. The description that most of us would associate with Gödel is "the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic." Nonetheless, we can easily imagine that same other man, named "Schmidt," was the person who actually discovered that arithmetic is incomplete.¹⁵¹ Descriptivism should imply that when we use the name "Gödel" we are, in fact, speaking about Schmidt. Yet it is clear that we talk about Gödel – and hold false beliefs about him.

The consequence of the modal argument is that Descriptivism is not a viable thesis for clarifying the meaning of names, because replacing a name with its associated description in a modal context may change the truth-value of the proposition originally expressed. In the wake of the above two steps of the semantic argument, Descriptivism does not seem very likely even as a theory about how we fix the reference of a name. Its only use seems to be for characterizing the infrequent naming practices where one bestows a name upon whatever, if anything, happens to fit a certain description, such as that instituted by Le Verrier's decision to name "Neptune" the object that causes perturbations β in Uranus' orbit.¹⁵²

In contrast to the Descriptivist view, Kripke advocates a two-step practice where one initially introduces the name via ostension or by using a reference-fixing description and then passes it on to other subjects who decide to use it with the same reference as that intended by the subject who initially introduced the name. According to this alternative picture, a subject is not required to possess discriminating knowledge, but only intend to refer to the same object that started the chain of communication. The causal theory of reference assigns a certain individual to a name in virtue of the causal chain of communication that grounds the use of the name in the initial act of baptism.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 83-84.

¹⁵² Even so, the modal argument would prevent the further comment that the description gives the meaning of the name.

Let us take now a closer look at the two steps of the semantic argument. To begin with, Kripke thinks that the ordinary practice of having partial knowledge of the referent of a name conflicts with Descriptivism and there may be a temptation to say that, relative to certain contexts, the common man does not know what he is speaking about. We can explore this route by relying on considerations adduced by Jason Stanley.¹⁵³ According to a particular standard of knowing what a name refers to, only speakers with identifying knowledge may be said to know to whom names such as “Cicero” or “Feynman” refer to. This type of standard is needed in situations where we need necessary and sufficient conditions for identifying the referent of the name. Suppose that the FBI is in the process of conducting an investigation of the scientists proposed to participate in the Manhattan Project. Somebody whose only knowledge of Feynman is “some guy who studies physics at Princeton” would not count as knowing to whom the name refers. In contrast, if we consider a situation where knowing where one works is knowing enough about the person, then the same person would be counted as being knowledgeable of the name’s referent.

However, this distinction is not really needed to deal with Kripke’s example. The missing element in the conception that Kripke cites is precisely bearing the very name one is asked about. The conception that the subject has of Cicero is, in fact, expressible by saying “He is the most famous Roman orator who bore the name ‘Cicero.’” In speaking about Cicero, such a subject assumes that the mere mention of the name, along with the fact that he is speaking of a famous Roman orator, would be enough to single out a certain individual of whom he may, if he wants, find out additional information from other members of his linguistic community. Note that I included in the description the property of being the most famous Roman orator bearing the name “Cicero.” This is necessary because one who uses the

¹⁵³ Stanley, “Understanding, Context-Relativity, and the Description Theory.” Applying his argument to proper names, Kripke may be said to have shown only that in certain contexts it is correct to ascribe to a speaker knowledge that Cicero is an orator, even if the speaker is not in the possession of non-trivial, identifying information regarding the Roman orator. However, knowledge ascriptions which would be true at all contexts would require grasp of the type of information recommended by Descriptivism.

name in such conditions must assume that there are no other equally famous Roman orators who bore the same name.

To test this explanation, suppose that there are, in fact, two such Roman orators and that they are considered to be equal in all aspects that could make one famous in one's community. Imagine that, upon being asked "Whom are you talking about when uttering 'Cicero'?", the subject replies "Well, I am talking about some famous Roman orator." I submit that, after being told that there are two equally famous Roman orators who bore this name, the subject himself would face extraordinary difficulties trying to explain whom he was speaking about. Equally, we, as participants in the public game of using the name, would be similarly perplexed regarding the person he was speaking about and would be unable to identify which of the two syntactically identical names the subject meant to use. Descriptivism predicts that we would face a conundrum in such situations and I believe it is a virtue of the theory that it allows for such grey areas.

Turning to the second step of the semantic argument, we should notice that the charge cannot hold any water if the subject to whom we impute false beliefs is the person who introduces the name in the language.¹⁵⁴ Donnellan asks us to imagine a situation where a subject sees two squares, one on top of the other, and gives the name "alpha" to the top square and "beta" to the bottom one.¹⁵⁵ However, unbeknownst to him, he wears spectacles which invert his visual field. What square did he label with the name "alpha"?

As Boër points out, the answer depends on the way he wants us to comprehend the individual he has in mind.¹⁵⁶ On the one hand, if he says "This square shall be called 'alpha'" and points his finger at what he believes is the top square, then we should take him to speak about the bottom square because this is what he is pointing in fact at. On the other hand, if he simply says "I shall call by the name 'alpha' the square on top" and *means* what he says, then

¹⁵⁴ See also Boër, "Reference and Identifying Descriptions," 216.

¹⁵⁵ Donnellan, "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions," 347.

¹⁵⁶ Boër, "Reference and Identifying Descriptions," 218-219.

we should conclude that he tagged with “alpha” the top square. This shows that the creator of the name refers to whatever the description he uses to fix the reference of the name denotes. There is no sense in asking whether the description he used was incorrect. He may be wrong about which object did in fact satisfy the description, but Descriptivism does not require of the subject who introduced the name to be infallible about the denotation of the description. The second step in the semantic argument can only apply to users of the name, where the possibility of acquiring mistaken information about the name’s referent is genuine.

The distinction between users and originator of the naming practice is acknowledged by Kripke himself, when saying that one can use a name simply on the basis of intending it to refer to whatever the inventor of the name initially referred to. Descriptivism can equally accept the distinction. We do not have to hold that the inventor of the name is always infallible. One can become confused regarding the object whose name one introduced in the first place. The distinction makes sense only with reference to a narrow timeframe when the first tokens of the name are used. Afterwards, the creator of the name becomes a user like everybody else and can stand corrected regarding this or that piece of information. A name is not only a randomly chosen tag meant to bring to mind a mass of descriptive material, but also a means to streamline communication. When the creator of the name bestows it to others, he is in the position in which a novelist is regarding his own writings. He can be better interpreted by his audience.

If the above remarks are correct, then a Descriptivist can accept that the cluster of descriptions one associates with the name’s referent includes a description that requires the subject to refer to the same thing that the inventor of the name referred to. We can view this description as a safeguard against epistemic limitations, which is based on the assumption that the linguistic community one belongs to can provide correct information about the individual the creator of the name had in mind.

We should not, however, expect the description that references the inventor's intentions to trump every other description in any situation. To give an example that Evans tendered as a criticism of the causal theory of reference, Marco Polo mistakenly thought that "Madagascar" is a name for the African island, whereas the natives used it to speak about a part of the mainland.¹⁵⁷ Should we say, then, that we referred all this time to a certain region of the mainland? This would be intuitively incorrect. Such cases support Descriptivism because one could argue here that the weight of the descriptions we associate with the island trumps reference to the geographical location that the originator of the name had in mind. Names are introduced because they are practical shortcuts to a mass of descriptive material. If the naming convention has a long history, then revising it may sometimes prove to be detrimental to its usefulness. If a mistake is repeatedly made, then it becomes the norm. Descriptivism can account for this fact by noting that the description "the object that the creators of the name referred to" can be outweighed in certain circumstances. I conclude that the semantic argument can be countered by Descriptivism.

3.5 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Identities between rigid designators, if true, are necessarily true. If the identity relation obtains here, at this world, then how could the object lose it at some other world? The necessity of the proposition expressed by "Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus" is grounded in the facts that names are rigid designators and that there is no world where the object actually referred to by both names can fail to be identical to itself.

One interesting consequence of defining necessity as truth at all worlds accessible from ours is that it turns it into a category conceptually distinct from that of *a priori*ity. Necessity pertains, roughly speaking, to whether something takes place at all relevant worlds,

¹⁵⁷ Gareth Evans, "The Causal Theory of Names," 11.

regardless of how we come to know it or believe it. Let us say that something is *a priori* true if “a particular person or knower knows something *a priori* or believes it true on the basis of *a priori* evidence,” where *a priori* evidence is defined as justification independent of any experience.¹⁵⁸

It follows that the sentence “Hesperus is Phosphorus” expresses a necessary *a posteriori* truth. It is necessary true because it is an identity sentence between two rigid designators that is actually true and it is *a posteriori* true because we needed to rely on empirical investigation in order to establish its truth. Modal categories have to do with the truth-values that propositions have at various worlds. Epistemic categories have to do with how we justify our beliefs in the truth of certain propositions.

Consider the definition of “one meter” as “the length of a certain bar *S* in Paris.” We can say that we know the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence “The length of the bar *S* is one meter” by mere conceptual examination. We are *a priori* justified in believing it because, we may imagine, this is how people resolved to use the words “one meter.” However, the sentence “The length of the bar *S* is one meter” does not express a necessary proposition.¹⁵⁹ In different circumstances, the length of *S* might have been less than one meter, say, because the temperature was lower and this caused the bar to contract. The sentence, although *a priori*, expresses a contingent truth.

This scenario is similar to that where Le Verrier introduced the name “Neptune” to refer to the planet that causes perturbations β in the orbit of Uranus. The proposition expressed by the sentence “If Neptune exists, then Neptune is the planet causing perturbations in the orbit of Uranus” is known *a priori*, but remains, at the same time, contingent, because Neptune might have not caused the reported perturbations.

¹⁵⁸ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 35.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 54-55.

Having distinguished between modal and epistemic categories, Kripke can propound a third argument against Descriptivism. If Descriptivism is correct, then each name is associated by a given speaker with one description or with a cluster of descriptions. Given this foundational connection between names and descriptions, we can say that, for a given speaker, Descriptivism implies that the speaker knows *a priori* the proposition expressed by the sentence “If n exists, then n has most of the φ ’s,” where n is an individual that has most of the properties φ .¹⁶⁰ However, ordinary speakers do not regularly know *a priori* such propositions. Therefore, Descriptivism is false.

Why does Kripke think that we are not normally in a position to know *a priori* this type of propositions? Remember the story of the hapless Schmidt, who actually discovered that arithmetic is incomplete. Descriptivism implies that, when we use the name “Gödel,” we adhere, among others, to the following two theses:

(3) If most, or a weighted most, of the φ ’s are satisfied by one unique object y , then y is the referent of “Gödel.”

(4) If no unique object satisfies most, or a weighted most, of the φ ’s, then “Gödel” does not refer.¹⁶¹

Thesis (4) can be rewritten as

(4’) If there is an individual that “Gödel” refers to, then he satisfies most, or a weighted most, of the φ ’s

and in conjunction with (3), it is equivalent to saying that

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 65.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 64-65. I rephrased Thesis (4).

The referent of “Gödel” exists \equiv There is an individual who satisfies most, or a weighted most, of the φ ’s.

Explaining why we cannot know *a priori* propositions expressed by sentences of the form “If n exists, then n has most of the φ ’s,” Kripke states

[n]otice that even in a case where (3) and (4) *happen* to be true, a typical speaker hardly knows *a priori* that they are, as required by the theory. *I think* that my belief about Gödel *is* in fact correct and that the ‘Schmidt’ story is just a fantasy. But the belief hardly constitutes *a priori* knowledge.¹⁶²

So Kripke seems to be arguing as follows. We have to assume that Gödel exists, if we are willing to use the name for somebody credited with having discovered that arithmetic is incomplete. Given this assumption, the fact that Gödel has most of the properties the subject attributes to him turns out to rely on a conceptual connection. This simply *is* what the speaker means by “Gödel.” But saying that Gödel is identical to the individual who satisfies most of the φ ’s turns out to be a conjunction of two rather distinct theses, namely, (3) and (4), and how could one establish *a priori* that (3) and (4) are true? Consider the Schmidt case, which shows that (3) is false (Schmidt is not the referent of the name “Gödel.”) How can we establish *a priori* that this story is false?

I rehearse this argument at length because I want to show that a certain answer that was given to it is not addressing the main worry exposed above. Robin Jeshion claims to have identified the true premise that does the heavy lifting in Kripke’s argument, which is that

If not- p is epistemically possible, then p could not be known *a priori*¹⁶³,

¹⁶² Ibid, 87.

¹⁶³ Jeshion, “The Epistemological Argument against Descriptivism,” 330.

where p is epistemically possible “if one could imagine acquiring evidence consistent with one’s present evidence which would justify one in believing that p .”¹⁶⁴

Jeshion argues that Kripke relies on this premise when he infers from the fact that the Gödel-Schmidt case is possible to the conclusion that one could not know *a priori* that Gödel has most of the properties attributed to him. However, she thinks that the premise is manifestly false. I can imagine that a mathematician informs me of the falsity of Euclid’s theorem and that, given his reputation, I would come to doubt that there are in fact infinitely many prime numbers. If the class of *a priori* knowledge is to be restricted to propositions that I can comprehend, then Jeshion claims that I can similarly imagine that a mathematician assures me that he devised a very complicated proof, involving large numbers, showing that not all even numbers are divisible by 2.¹⁶⁵

There are two claims made here and I will argue that both are incorrect. The first claim is that the testimony from the renowned mathematician involves acquiring justification which allows me to believe that not all even numbers are divisible by 2. Jeshion is not entirely thorough on allowing the subject to understand the information conveyed. The target proposition can be grasped by the subject, but the reasons themselves (the proof) cannot. One can, then, impose the additional constraint that not only the conclusion, but also the reasons offered in its support, should be cognitively accessible to the subject. After all, imagine that I come to believe that Pythagoras’s theorem is correct not because I understand it, but because I was told by everyone else that it is true. Can I claim to know the proposition *a priori*? Obviously, not. I do not know *a priori* many complicated mathematical theorems, because I cannot understand their proofs. Believing that they are true because others vouch for them is the exact opposite of “justifications independent of any particular experience.”

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 331.

¹⁶⁵ Id., 332.

This takes us to the second claim that Jeshion makes, namely, that her reconstruction of Kripke's epistemological argument answers Kripke's original worry. I said that Kripke explicitly connects the semantic argument (the fact that (3) and (4) are *actually* sometimes false) with the epistemological argument. Why is Kripke saying

I think that my belief about Gödel is in fact correct and that the 'Schmidt' story is just a fantasy. But the belief hardly constitutes a priori knowledge?

Because the answer that one would give in attempting to disprove or confirm the Schmidt story would *essentially* employ *a posteriori* reasons. One would probably ask others or maybe start his own investigation into the origins of the famous theorem. It is not, therefore, the mere epistemic possibility of being wrong about the inventor of the theorem that grounds Kripke's argument. It is what evoking this possibility points towards.

If one evoked the possibility that 2 plus 2 do not equal 4, I would not, if I believe it *a priori*, call my friends and ask them whether they too know that $2+2=4$. If I had *a priori* reasons for believing it, I would revisit them. Yet holding that my current beliefs about Gödel's deed are correct does not involve going back to the drawing board and redoing the whole picture, so to speak. It involves empirical research of potentially unknown facts about the inventor of the theorem. This, I believe, is Kripke's point and Jeshion has not answered to it satisfactorily.

Let us take another look at the epistemological argument. The basic point, which was brought forth by the semantic argument as well, is that using a name is a public practice. "Gödel" is not just the name that I use for whoever discovered that arithmetic is incomplete, but also the name that I use expecting others to understand me upon hearing me pronouncing it. Yet I can be in a position to acquire information about different people, believing that there

is only one person of whom the information is correct. This is not just a mere possibility. Error is a constant feature of our interaction with the world.

Let us assume that “ φ ” refers only to properties that do not make reference to other subjects. Then a Descriptivist can hold, that, given a cluster of descriptions associated with the name, it is *a priori* that

If n exists, then either n has most of the φ ’s or n is the individual referred to by other members of the subject’s community.

In other words, simply by inspecting the concepts evoked by the name, I am in a position to know that either its referent satisfies most of the properties I associate with the referent or that others may utilize another cluster to identify it for me. What weights are allocated to what descriptions is a contextual matter. We want to be able to save as much information as possible, while communicating with others at ease. There may be no easy answers in many cases – the unwillingness to give a clear answer is aptly explained by Descriptivism. However, we know *a priori* either that our descriptions can do the job of identifying the name’s referent or that other people’s descriptions can fulfill this task.

3.6 DESCRIPTIVE NAMES

Kripke holds that a sentence such as “If Neptune exists, then Neptune is the planet that causes perturbations in the orbit of Uranus” expresses a contingent *a priori* truth. It is contingent because Neptune might not have affected in this manner the orbit of Uranus. It is *a priori* because Le Verrier was supposed to know its truth simply in virtue of having introduced the name “Neptune.” Similarly, defining “one meter” as the length of stick S in Paris can justify one’s *a priori* belief in the contingent proposition that if S exists, S is one

meter long.¹⁶⁶ Following Evans, let us call names whose referents are fixed by a description “descriptive names”.

Can sentences containing descriptive names express singular propositions? I should begin by saying that I do not believe that the debate surrounding the above examples is furthered by framing it in terms of the referential-attributive uses of a description. Albert Casullo, for instance, wants to apply the distinction in order to show that there are no *a priori* contingent propositions. He holds that, if the description “the length of *S*” is used attributively, then the name “one meter” functions in fact as an abbreviation of the description.¹⁶⁷ Similarly, we should infer that, if Le Verrier used the description “the planet that causes the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus” attributively, then the name “Neptune” is a linguistic shortcut for the wordier description. Because abbreviations can be replaced truth-functionally with the abbreviated mass in any context, the proposition expressed is necessary and *a priori*. If, on the other hand, the description “the length of *S*” is used referentially, then the proposition expressed by “*S* is one meter long” is that *S* has this particular length (the one the speaker denotes by the referential use) *and* this particular length is one meter. This proposition is contingent, but, because the second conjunct can only be known *a posteriori*, the whole proposition counts as conveying *a posteriori* knowledge too.

We said that the distinction between referential and attributive uses of a description is made with respect to whether the descriptive material mentioned in the description is semantically operational in identifying the proposition expressed. If it is, then the description is used attributively. If it is not, then, instead of uttering the description, I may have pointed

¹⁶⁶ The assumption of existence may be seen as needed because simply saying “*S* is one meter long” implies that the proper name refers to something and this latter piece of information cannot be justified on non-empirical grounds. See Carter, “On *A priori* Contingent Truths,” 105. Ray, “Kripke & the Existential Complaint”, challenges this assessment. See also Odegard, “*A priori* Contingency” for a discussion of whether the conditional sentence is *a priori* and contingent.

¹⁶⁷ Casullo, “Kripke on the *A priori* and the Necessary,” 156-157.

at the relevant object, or grabbed it and then whistled, while holding it, or done whatever other action was successful in shifting the audience's attention towards the object.

It is rather obvious that the descriptive material used in introducing the name "Neptune" or the phrase "one meter" is relevant to identifying the proposition expressed. Le Verrier did not hold any belief about a specific object to the effect that it causes the observer perturbations, prior to introducing the name "Neptune" in the language. Similarly, the meter example was used for analyzing the process of introducing a measurement system based on the length of a random object. Descriptive names are introduced via attributive uses of definite descriptions.

Casullo thinks that, if the descriptive material is operational in individuating the proposition expressed, then the description can only be used as an abbreviation. He offers no clear explanation for this, but the following may be helpful in determining why he thinks the inference is plainly true:

The term ["one meter"] is not being introduced as the name of a particular length which the speaker has singled out but as the name of whatever length happens to satisfy the definite description. This method of introducing the term results in what Kripke calls an 'abbreviative definition', for the speaker is using the term 'one metre' as an abbreviation of the phrase 'the length of S at t_0 '. As a result of this definition, the proposition expressed by the sentence 'The length of S at t_0 is one metre' is a necessary one, true solely in virtue of the terms used in expressing it.¹⁶⁸

The idea seems to be that, when we consider an alternative to this world, where the length of S at t_0 is different from what it actually is, we should agree that the term "one meter" refers to the length of S at t_0 in that world. But this last step is anything but obvious. If the term "one meter" is introduced to refer to whatever fits the description "the length of S at t_0 " here, at this world, it does not *also* mean that whatever fits the description at another world is also the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 156.

referent of the term “one meter.”¹⁶⁹ Contra Casullo, the fact that the reference-fixing description is used attributively does not imply that the name abbreviates the description in any context.

Since I believe that Descriptivism is correct also as an account of reference-fixing, I hold that all names are descriptive. The philosophical significance of names such as “Neptune” does not rely merely on the fact that the existence of the referent seems uncertain at the time when the name was introduced. As Cowles points out, one can introduce the name “Alpha” for the actual number of planets, whatever this is.¹⁷⁰ The name is guaranteed to refer to a number (0, if it turns out there are no planets) and the subject who introduces it knows this.

Similarly, the problems raised by uses of descriptive names do not depend on the modal status of the proposition expressed.¹⁷¹ Jeshion notes that one can introduce the name “Angelesium” for the element having the atomic number 121. Assuming essentialism about atomic numbers, the proposition expressed by “If there is an element having the atomic number 121, then Angelesium is the element having the atomic number 121” is necessary. However, this does not make the knowledge that we gain of a specific element via stipulation less peculiar. Jeshion also holds that the *a priori* status of the proposition expressed is irrelevant. Descriptive names are introduced via a process whereby we acquire *a priori* knowledge *non-inferentially*. Suppose, for instance, that one introduces the name “Joe” for the 69th prime number. It is clear that the proposition that Joe is the 69th prime number is *a priori*. However, its truth is known not in virtue of arithmetic reasoning, but in virtue of a stipulative act. This act seems to put us in contact with an object, if any, without presuming any prior interaction with it.

¹⁶⁹ See also Kitcher, “Apriority and Necessity,” who argues that a term whose reference is fixed via a description abbreviates the rigidified description obtained by adding “actual” to the reference-fixing description.

¹⁷⁰ Cowles, “The Contingent *A priori*,” 140.

¹⁷¹ Jeshion, “Ways of Taking a Meter,” 299-300.

If we accept that descriptive names exist, then we must accept that one is able to acquire *de re* thoughts without being acquainted with the name's referent.¹⁷² Descriptive names are a threat to a certain conception of *de re* thoughts, infused with empiricist epistemological assumptions. This conception has it that, in order to have a thought about an object, the subject must interact with it.

It is this theoretical inclination that leads Salmon, for instance, to argue that the meter sentence expresses *a posteriori* knowledge.¹⁷³ His claim is that the subject must look at *S*'s actual length, in order to know of it that *S* has the length it actually has, and this can only provide *a posteriori* justification. Without any interaction with the stick *S*, the subject can only know that "one meter" refers to whatever length *S* has at *t*₀, provided that *S* exists.

One upshot of Salmon's argument is that Kripke was wrong to concurrently endorse the Theory of Descriptions and say that names can have their reference fixed by a definite description. A description does not "fix" anything. According to Russell's analysis, one who says "'*n*' refers to the *F*" does not succeed to direct one's thought to any particular individual. One does not "fix" an individual as the name's referent by the above stipulation, because the utterance can only express an object-independent thought, i.e., that there is at least an individual which is the unique *F* and which is the referent of the name "*n*."

We have a choice to make at this point. On the one hand, we can discard the notion of reference-fixing and the idea that names can be descriptive. On the other, we can search for an account of definite descriptions that allows them to fix the reference of names, even when

¹⁷² Among others, Donnellan, "The Contingent *A priori* and Rigid Designators" and Salmon, "How to Measure the Standard Meter" deny that this is possible. Donnellan argues that the only knowledge that one can secure in introducing "*N*" for whatever happens to be the *F* is that the proposition "If the *F* exists, *N* is the *F*" is true. One does not know, however, the proposition that if the *F* exists, *N* is the *F*. If one knows something about an individual, one is able to identify the individual. However, it seems plausible to think that Le Verrier might have accidentally spotted Neptune in a different situation without being able to say "I knew that *this* object caused perturbations in the orbit of Uranus." As Jeshion notes ("Donnellan on Neptune"), Frege's puzzles are an abundant source of cases where one is acquainted with an individual, yet one fails to re-identify it. Descriptive names are not different in this respect from ordinary names. If failure to re-identify is the criterion for allowing only metalinguistic knowledge of the sort described above, then it will turn out that we have extremely scarce *de re* knowledge.

¹⁷³ Nathan Salmon, "How to Measure the Standard Meter," 198.

the subject is not acquainted with the intended objects. I shall say more about the semantic consequences of discarding the epistemological requirement that naming presupposes acquaintance in the last chapter.

CHAPTER 4 – WIDESCOPISM

4.1 EARLY FORMULATIONS

Kripke's modal argument was that if "Aristotle" is synonymous with the description "the last great philosopher of antiquity," then the following two sentences should have the same truth value at all worlds:

- (1) Aristotle was fond of dogs.
- (2) The last great philosopher of antiquity was fond of dogs.

However, this is false because we can imagine a possible world where Aristotle was fond of dogs, but completely ignorant of philosophy, and where the last great philosopher of antiquity in that world loathed dogs. The argument relies on the observation that names, unlike descriptions, are rigid. "Aristotle" as used by us refers in any counterfactual circumstance to the same person, whereas definite descriptions, such as the above, may easily vary in their denotation, if any.

In the present chapter, I examine a type of replies to the modal argument that I will name "Widescopism," to keep with the established use. Widescopism argues that, under a certain reading of (2), sentences (1) and (2) have indeed the same truth value at any world. This is the reading where the description is given wide scope over modal expressions. Thus, the sentence "At world w , the teacher of Alexander was a philosopher" is held to convey the proposition that the teacher of Alexander is such that, at world w , he is a philosopher. We can, therefore, define Widescopism as the view that the meaning of the name n in S 's language is given by the wide scope description "the G " provided that

- a. *S* believes there is a unique *G*.
- b. For any *x*, *n* refers to *x* if *x* is the (unique) *G*.¹⁷⁴

One of the earliest Widescopist proposals was in fact advanced well before Kripke formulated the modal argument. Arthur Smullyan defends a classic Widescopist position in his “Modality and Description,” in a reply to Quine’s withering comments on the meaningfulness of modal sentences, made in “Notes on Existence and Necessity.” Quine was keen to show that modal operators create intensional contexts, on the same par with quotation marks and attitudinal verbs. Names that appear in such contexts do not occupy a purely designative position, namely, one “in which the name refers simply to the object designated.”¹⁷⁵ Names that occupy purely designative positions can be substituted with other co-referential names, while preserving the truth value of the initial utterance, as in

Hesperus is a planet.

Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus.

Thus, Phosphorus is a planet.

In contrast, quotation marks and attitudinal verbs create contexts where such substitutions do not always preserve the truth value, as in

“Hesperus” has eight letters.

Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus.

Thus, “Phosphorus” has eight letters.

¹⁷⁴ Hunter, “Soames and Widescopism,” 231. To avoid the lengthier formulation, I only speak of *the* wide scope description “the *G*.” Obviously, Widescopism is consistent with Cluster Descriptivism.

¹⁷⁵ Quine, “Notes on Existence and Necessity,” 114.

or

John believes that Hesperus is a planet.

Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus.

Thus, John believes that Phosphorus is a planet.

Quine thought that all modal contexts are also intensional.¹⁷⁶ To show that names embedded in such contexts do not occupy a purely designative position, he claimed that, while it is true that

(1) 9 is necessarily greater than 7,

(2) 9 is the number of planets,

it does not follow that

(3) The number of planets is necessarily greater than 7.

Smullyan's reply is that the conclusion is false only in the reading where the description is assigned narrow scope, i.e., "Necessarily, the number of planets is greater than 7." If the description is assigned wide scope, however, as in "The number of planets is such that it is necessarily greater than 7," then the argument is sound.¹⁷⁷

Besides providing a way to block Kripke's argument, Widescopism has also been held to account for the rigidity of names. The fact that a name *n* is rigid is usually explained by saying that

¹⁷⁶ Quine, "Notes on Existence and Necessity," 122.

¹⁷⁷ In the latter part of "Modality and Description," Smullyan also discusses scope ambiguities regarding class abstracts. Smullyan extends the argument in "A Note on an Argument of Quine."

There is a certain individual x , namely, the referent at this world of the name n , such that the proposition that n is F is true at a world w iff x is F at w .¹⁷⁸

Widescopism can effortlessly account for this insight by saying that the name n , which expresses the description “the G ,” is rigid in that

There is a certain individual x , namely, the G , such that the proposition that the G is F is true at any world w iff x is F at w .

4.2 WIDESCOPISM AND TRUTH CONDITIONS

A feature of this type of analysis that is sometimes overlooked is that the description associated with the name is required to take wide scope over any modal construction, even when the construction specifies the truth conditions for the sentence embedding the name in the scope of the modal operator. For instance, François Recanati challenges the claim that names maintain their rigidity within a Widescopist framework, by arguing that the very proposition that the G is such that, possibly, it is F is not about one single individual.¹⁷⁹

Recanati correctly points out that the description will change its denotation, depending upon which world is considered as actual, but he is mistaken in assuming that the description does not take wide scope over the construction “with respect to.” What the Widescopist has to maintain is only that

“Possibly, n is F ” is true with respect to w iff “The G is such that, possibly, it is F ” is true with respect to w .

¹⁷⁸ Soames, “The Modal Argument,” 3. Ditto for any other proposition expressed by a sentence embedding the name.

¹⁷⁹ Recanati, “Rigidity and Direct Reference,” 106.

Given this and the principle that connects the formal and the material modes¹⁸⁰

Necessarily, ($\lceil R \rceil$ is true with respect to S iff with respect to S, R),

it follows that the sentence

“Possibly, n is F ” is true with respect to w iff with respect to w , the G is F ,

and since the description is assumed to take wide scope over any modal construction, including “with respect to w ,” the correct truth conditions are expressed by

“Possibly, n is F ” is true with respect to w iff the G is such that, with respect to w , it is F .

The same oversight is at work in one of Anthony Everett’s arguments against Widescopism. Everett asks us to consider a world w_I , where English is spoken as here, where Aristotle is named “Aristotle,” but where Alexander the Great was the last great philosopher of antiquity.¹⁸¹ Let us assume that the writings of Alexander, who cannot suffer dogs, are lost, and that everybody comes to believe that Aristotle, a dog-loving person, is in fact the last great philosopher of antiquity. Consider now the following two utterances in w_I :

¹⁸⁰ Sosa, “Rigidity in the Scope of Russell’s Theory,” 17. See also pages 28-30 for a discussion on a similar charge brought by Soames that Widescopism cannot account for the thesis that names are rigid in modal contexts.

¹⁸¹ Everett, “Recent Defenses of Descriptivism,” 112-113. Everett offers another argument against Widescopism, which seems to me a case of begging the question. The argument is exposed and defended from page 109 to page 112 and relies on the claim that an utterance of “The last great philosopher of antiquity was fond of dogs” is unambiguously false at a world w_I , where the last great philosopher of antiquity was not fond of dogs. Following the same steps as outlined above, it should follow that it is unambiguously false that, at w_I , the last great philosopher of antiquity was fond of dogs. But this is simply the denial of Widescopism. Moreover, the denial cannot be justified by an appeal to intuitions, because it is intuitively true that definite descriptions are scope-ambiguous in modal contexts.

(U_1) Aristotle was fond of dogs.

(U_2) The last great philosopher of antiquity was fond of dogs.

It is plain that U_1 is true at w_1 , while U_2 is false at w_1 . Then the following argument is valid:

(1) U_1 is true at w_1 .

(2) U_2 is false at w_1 .

(3) Therefore, U_1 and U_2 differ in truth conditions.

(4) The truth condition of U_1 in w_1 is the same as the truth condition of an utterance of the same sentence in the actual world.

(5) The truth condition of U_2 in w_1 is the same as the truth condition of an utterance of the same sentence in the actual world.

(6) Therefore, U_1 and U_2 have different truth conditions in the actual world.

(7) If two utterances have different truth conditions, then they cannot have the same content.

(8) Therefore, Widescopism is false¹⁸².

Is premise (5) true? Everett seems to be thinking that utterances at this world and w_1 of a sentence of the form “The F is G ” are the same because they both are the F ’s being G . But this may be too fast. If the description is to take wide scope over any modal expressions, then an actual utterance of the sentence has the following truth condition:

“The F is G ” at some world w iff at w the F is G (the F ’s being G at w obtains).

¹⁸² Steps (4) and (5) do not appear as such in Everett’s paper. He speaks of an utterance having the same truth conditions in w_1 and in our world and, for reasons that I already explained, I prefer to speak of utterances as tokened sentences at a world/context, so that an utterance is by definition unique.

According to Widescopism, the right-side sentence is scope-ambiguous. Now, if w turns out to be the actual world, the scope ambiguity can be glossed over. Whether we clarify the utterance as meaning that, at the actual world, the F is G , or that the (actual) F is such that, at the actual world, it is G , we cannot end up with different truth-values. Yet Widescopism claims that the ambiguity becomes salient, once we allow that the evaluation world be different from the world where the utterance was made.

Similarly, an utterance of “The F is G ” made at w_I has the truth condition

“The F is G ” at some world w iff at w the F is G ,

and yet because the utterance is made in that world in the language spoken by its inhabitants, the ambiguity in the right-side sentence is clarified as

“The F is G ” at some world w iff the F (at w_I) is such that at w it is G .

which is different from the right-side sentence that accounts for the truth conditions of the utterance made in the actual world:

“The F is G ” at some world w iff the F (at actual world) is such that at w it is G .

If we identify the meaning of a description with the role it plays in the utterance where it is used and we assume that definite descriptions are scope-ambiguous, then we have to accept also that the meaning of the utterance “The F is G ” is itself ambiguous, depending on the scope decision we make regarding the construction “at w , the F is G .”

4.3 AN ARGUMENT FREE OF MODAL OPERATORS

Can we express Kripke's insight in a way which would make Widescopism ineffective? We can broach this issue by considering Hudson and Tye's strengthened argument against Widescopism.¹⁸³ Hudson and Tye believe that Kripke's argument is deficient because it makes use of modal operators in drawing a contrast between "Possibly, n is F " and "Possibly, the G is F ," which opens the door to a rejoinder based on scope ambiguities. The gist of Hudson and Tye's argument is to restate the original case in a way which does not employ a modal sentence. Consider the following pair, where n is the F :

n is F

The F is F .

The proposition that the F is F is entailed by the proposition that there is a unique F , that is "*it is necessary on the assumption that there is a unique F* , meaning by this simply that it is a necessary consequence of 'There is exactly one F .'"¹⁸⁴ This allows Hudson and Tye to rephrase Kripke's argument as follows:

- (1) If n were to mean the F , then " n is an F " would be necessary on the assumption that there is a unique F .
- (2) " n is an F " is not necessary on the assumption that there is a unique F .
- (3) Thus, n does not mean the F .

The difference between the original argument and the new one is that, while in the former case "we have a remark about a sentence which contains a modal operator," in the

¹⁸³ Hudson and Tye, "Proper Names and Definite Descriptions."

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 64. Italics in original.

latter argument “we have rather a modal remark about a non-modal sentence.”¹⁸⁵ This should disarm the Widescopist rejoinder, because there is no scope ambiguity in (1). Let us rephrase, then, Hudson and Tye’s claim as saying that the result of similarly replacing the name with the description in (1) is not scope ambiguous:

“The *F* is *F*” is necessary on the assumption that there is a unique *F*.

Since in the sentence “The *F* is *F*” the description takes by default widest scope, the revised argument also establishes the falsity of Widescopism.

Is the argument proof to scope ambiguities? In a reply given to Hudson and Tye, Paul Yu claims that the new criticism is essentially a reworking of Kripke’s original case and that the Widescopist reply could be iterated.¹⁸⁶ According to him, the first premise in Hudson and Tye’s argument can be rephrased as follows:

- (1) If *n* means the *F*, then “*n* is an *F*” is necessary on the assumption that there is a unique *F*.
- (2) If *n* means the *F*, then it is necessary that, if there is a unique *F*, then “*n* is an *F*” is true.
- (3) If *n* means the *F*, then it is necessary that, if there is a unique *F*, then *n* is an *F*.
- (4) If *n* means the *F*, then “it is necessary that, if there is a unique *F*, then *n* is an *F*” is true.¹⁸⁷

Finally, if *n* is replaced with the associated description in (4), the result is scope-ambiguous and false, if the description is assigned wide scope.

¹⁸⁵ Hudson and Tye, “Proper Names and Definite Descriptions.”

¹⁸⁶ Yu, “The Modal Argument against Description Theories of Names.”

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 209. I replaced corner quotes with quotation marks.

Hudson and Tye answer by pointing out that the above chain of transformations works only by assuming that

(a) The proposition expressed by S_1 entails the proposition expressed by S_2

amounts to

(b) The proposition expressed by " $S_1 \supset S_2$ " is necessary.

which amounts to

(c) The proposition expressed by " $\Box (S_1 \supset S_2)$ " is true.¹⁸⁸

This is held not to be generally true when either sentence contains a widest scope description. Hudson and Tye exemplify this by letting S_1 be "Homer was blind" and S_2 be "Someone was blind," where "Homer" is equivalent to "the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*." Then (a) is the true claim that

There being a unique author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* who was blind entails there being someone blind,

while (b) "is the false attribution of necessity to the proposition that there is a unique author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* such that, if he was blind, someone was blind."¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Hudson and Tye, "Reply to Yu," 177.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

I will write “<the F >_w” when the description is Widescopist. Hudson and Tye hold that (a) does not entail (b) which does not entail (c):

(a) The proposition that <the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*>_w is blind entails the proposition that there is someone blind.

(b) The proposition expressed by “If <the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*>_w is blind, then someone is blind” is necessary.

(c) The proposition that <the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*>_w is such that necessarily if he is blind, then someone is blind is true.

First, I should remark that in (b) necessity is mentioned as a property of propositions, not as a modal operator which occurs in a sentence. The Widescopist can emphasize that Hudson and Tye themselves define Widescopism as the view that a name is “equivalent to a definite description *which is always to be accorded the widest possible scope in any sentence in which it occurs.*”¹⁹⁰ However, it is not clear why Widescopism should make similar recommendations when necessity is attributed to a proposition. This allows the Widescopist to hold that in (b) the description is not required to take wide scope over the conditional, because the conditional operator is not itself embedded in the scope of a modal operator. In other words, Widescopism can be qualified as being the view that the description is to be granted widest scope in a sentence *relative* to the modal operator(s) that occur in the sentence. Where there is no modal operator involved, the Widescopist should not feel compelled to make any particular recommendation regarding the scope of the description.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 176.

Second, it is not obvious why (b) is false, even on the reading in which the description is given widest scope. Hudson and Tye say that this would be “the false attribution of necessity to the proposition that there is a unique author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* such that, if he was blind, someone was blind.” What they apparently imply is that (b) states that all worlds must contain an individual such that he is the unique author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and such that, if he was blind, someone was blind. But why should we view (b) as stating this? The reasoning seems to be the following:

- (1) It is necessary that p is true iff with respect to any world w , p .
- (2) Thus, it is necessary that the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is such that, if he was blind, someone was blind iff, with respect to any world w , the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is such that, if he was blind, someone was blind.
- (3) For any w , the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is such that, if he was blind, someone was blind iff there is a unique author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in w such that, if he was blind, someone was blind.

It is clear now that if the description is Widescopist, then (3) is false and the correct statement should be

- (3') For any w , the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is such that, if he was blind, someone was blind iff there is a unique author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* such that in w the following is true: if he was blind, someone was blind.

A defender of Widescopism can thus coherently state that (b) expresses a truth, even when Widescopist descriptions are given widest scope in any sentence, and join Yu in claiming that Hudson and Tye's argument fares no better than Kripke's original criticism.

One point which we should always keep in mind when dealing with a Russellian analysis of descriptions is that the contribution made by the description depends on the larger context in which it is embedded. Thus, even if the description "the king of France" makes only one contribution to the content of the sentence "The King of France is bald," it can play two semantic roles when embedded in the sentence "The King of France is not bald."

Descriptions have semantic import only relative to a sentential context. The description "the *F*" can contribute semantically only in one way to what is said by an utterance of "The *F* is *F*," but it can make two possible contributions to what is said by an utterance of "On the assumption that there is a unique *F*, that which is expressed by 'The *F* is *F*' is necessary." Russellianism about descriptions does not imply that, if the description takes wide scope in the former sentence, then it must take similar scope in the latter. The range of scopal alternatives that a description has depends only on the structure of the sentence where the description is embedded.

It seems to me that this blocks Wasserman's argument that Widescopism is threatened by redundancy.¹⁹¹ Wasserman correctly points out that defenders of Widescopism have to agree that there is a way of saying "The *F* is *F*" in which the utterance is not entailed by "There is a unique *F*." I see no problem in accepting this, as long as entailment is defined, as per Hudson' and Tye's paper, as "necessary on the condition that." In other words, if the claim

"The *F* is *F*" is entailed by "There is a unique *F*."

¹⁹¹ Wasserman, "On Yu on Hudson & Tye."

means that

The proposition expressed by “The F is F ” is necessary on the assumption that there is a unique F .

which means that

The proposition expressed by “The F is F ” is true with respect to any world w , on the condition that in w it is true that there is a unique F ,

then a Widescopist can coherently state that it is not true that there being a unique F at some world is sufficient for the truth of the fact that $\langle \text{the } F \rangle_w$ is F . He can say this because saying that

With respect to any world w , the proposition expressed by “The F is F ” is true, on the condition that in w it is true that there is a unique F .

comes down to saying that

With respect to any world w , the F is F , on the condition that there is a unique F in w .

and depending on the scope given to the description, the statement can turn out to be true or false.

However, because Wasserman thinks that at the level of the logical form of the sentence

“The F is F ” is entailed by “There is a unique F .”

the description has to take the same (wide) scope as in “The F is F ,” he reasons that a Widescopist must further distinguish between a rigid sense of “the F ,” i.e., one in which the truth of “The F is F ” is not entailed by there being a unique F , and a non-rigid sense of the description, where the entailment relation holds. He goes on to say that if, on the one hand, names are identified with rigid wide scope descriptions, then scope considerations become redundant (rigid descriptions can also take narrow scope, e.g., “the actual F ”). If, on the other hand, names are held to be ambiguous between rigid and non-rigid wide scope descriptions, then the original impetus for abandoning Classical Descriptivism is lost, since it was the assumption that names and descriptions behave differently in modal contexts that led to Widescopism. But since the notion of scope is defined only relative to a sentence, the fact that the description “the F ” takes wide scope in the sentence “The F is F ” does not mean that it must take the same scope in any context where this sentence is mentioned.

4.4 SOAMES ON THE BASIC ARGUMENT AGAINST WIDESCOPISM

Widescopism is premised on the idea that modal constructions are essentially shift. When the argument of the modal operator or predicate does not contain any occurrence of a proper name, the modal expression is applied to the entire argument. However, when the argument contains at least an occurrence of a proper name, the modal operator/predicate is applied to the open formula that results from the substitution of the name with a variable (the variable is itself bound, in the wider, non-modal part of the sentence).

Soames thinks that this characteristic points towards a fundamental flaw in Widescopism, which can be uncovered through what he names “the basic argument.” Suppose that “the G ” is the description associated with n , which expresses a contingent property of the name’s

referent, and that the properties F and G are not necessarily correlated. Consider now the following argument:

(P₁) The proposition that if n is F , then something is both F and G = the proposition that if the G is F , then something is both F and G .

(P₂) The proposition that if the G is F , then something is both F and G is a necessary truth.

(C) The proposition that if n is F , then something is both F and G is a necessary truth.¹⁹²

The argument is, on the face of it, valid. However, Widescopism has to rephrase the conclusion as

(C') The G is such that the proposition that if it is F , then something is both F and G is a necessary truth.

and, under this reading, the argument is not valid.

Soames assumes that both premises of the basic argument are unambiguous, since if there is more than one way to understand them, then there may be enough leeway for a Widescopist to find his way out. Yet it is unclear why there can be only one mandatory reading of the two premises. Consider the first one:

(P₁) The proposition that if n is F , then something is both F and G = the proposition that if the G is F , then something is both F and G .

¹⁹² Soames, "The Modal Argument," 5-6.

David Hunter has argued that a Widescopist can extend his treatment to phrases of the form “the proposition that...” and claim that a sentence such as P_1 is ambiguous between a true, narrow-scope reading

($P_{1\text{narrow}}$) The proposition that if the G is F , then something is both F and G = the proposition that if the G is F , then something is both F and G

and a false, wide-scope reading

($P_{1\text{wide}}$) The proposition, with respect to the G , that if he is F , then something is both F and G = the proposition that if the G is F , then something is both F and G .¹⁹³

Moreover, as David Sosa noted, the second premise itself

(P_2) The proposition that if the G is F , then something is both F and G is a necessary truth.

is ambiguous between the following three readings, ranged in the order of increasing the scope of the description:

(P_{2a}) Necessarily, $[(\text{the } x: Gx) Fx \supset (\exists y)(Fy \ \& \ Gy)]$

(P_{2b}) Necessarily, $[(\text{the } x: Gx) (Fx \supset (\exists y)(Fy \ \& \ Gy))]$

(P_{2c}) $(\text{the } x: Gx)$ Necessarily $[Fx \supset (\exists y)(Fy \ \& \ Gy)]$.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Hunter, “Soames and Widescopism,” 237.

¹⁹⁴ Sosa, “Rigidity in the Scope of Russell’s Theory,” 26.

Soames' argument also assumes that the Widescopist has to have a specific view about the interaction between definite descriptions and modal predicates, such as "is a necessary truth." But this is again too strong an assumption. As Hunter points out, Widescopism is a thesis concerning exclusively the interaction between definite descriptions and modal adverbs ("necessarily" or "possibly").¹⁹⁵ It is not *also* a thesis about the way descriptions interact with modal predicates. This allows the Widescopist to hold that the conclusion of the basic argument

(C) The proposition that if n is F , then something is both F and G is a necessary truth.

is indeed synonymous with

(C'') The proposition that if the G is F , then something is both F and G is a necessary truth,

while refraining from pronouncing himself with regard to the truth value of the reading that Soames burdens Widescopism with, namely,

(C') The G is such that the proposition that if it is F , then something is both F and G is a necessary truth.

The reason why Soames thinks that (C) can only be rephrased as (C') is because he views the following as synonymous:

(1) Necessarily, p .

¹⁹⁵ Hunter, "Soames and Widescopism," 234.

(2) That p is a necessary truth.

But this is more reflective of Soames' own philosophical assumptions than of what a Widescopist is bound to accept, on grounds of conceptual coherence alone. (2), unlike (1), assumes that propositions exist. Soames may very well welcome such an ontological commitment. A Widescopist, on the other hand, can accept that the truth of (1), while denying that there are propositions and modal predicates, and thus denying that (2) is true.

4.5 WIDESCOPISM AS AN EXTENSION OF RUSSELLIAN DESCRIPTIVISM

Widescopism is a continuation of the project that Russell undertook in analyzing the logical form of sentences containing definite descriptions. In what follows, I will take a look at a certain consequence of this idea, which, when not properly acknowledged, can make Widescopism seem a mere variant of Direct Reference theories. Aside from the basic argument, Soames marshals two other challenges to the Widescopist analysis of names and in this section I will consider the second one.¹⁹⁶

Let us assume that speakers associate the name n with the description the G . Suppose now that Bill asserts the sentence "If n exists, then n is F ," and that the following two assumptions hold:

- (1) F expresses an essential, but non-obvious property, of the name's referent, such as the property of originating from a particular bit of genetic material and
- (2) the properties F and G are not necessarily correlated.

Then the following argument is intuitively valid:

¹⁹⁶ Soames, "The Modal Argument," 11.

(P₁) Bill asserted that if n exists, then n is F .

(P₂) It is a necessary truth that if n exists, then n is F .

(C) Bill asserted a necessary truth.

Yet Widescopism would symbolize the argument as:

(P₁') Bill asserted [that: n exists $\supset F_n$]

(P₂') (the x : Gx) [$\Box(x \text{ exists} \supset Fx)$]

(C') ($\exists p$)[Bill asserted p and p is a necessary truth]

Soames states that, while (P₂) attributes necessity to the proposition that if n exists, then n is F , the truth of (P₂') attributes necessity to the open formula “(x exists $\supset Fx$)”, where x is assigned the (actual) G . He goes on to say that the proposition expressed by “ n exists $\supset F_n$ ” is not identical with the proposition expressed by the open formula relative to this assignment, since the content of Bill’s assertion in (P₁) is, according to Widescopism, a descriptive proposition. But since he denies that such a proposition could be necessary, he considers that we have a further reason to discard Widescopism.

There are two points run together here. The first is that attributing necessity to a sentence containing a wide-scope descriptive cannot yield a truth. Soames does not advance any reason in support of this view. The only potential justification that can be supplied in the absence of a further argument is that Soames thinks that a sentence such as “The G is F ” cannot be necessarily true when the two properties are not necessarily co-instantiated. But the only reason why this could be the case is because the description “the G ” would be interpreted as an ordinary description, whose denotation (if any) varies from one possible world to another. However, if we hold, along with Widescopism, that the description

associated with a name is not a regular description in that it always takes wide scope over modal adverbs, then it is not clear why attributing necessity to the sentence “The G is F ” would not yield a truth, under the assumptions that the denotation of the description is always a member of the domain of objects extant at the actual world and that F expresses a necessary property of the description’s denotation.

The second point is that the proposition that Bill states in (P_1) and the one to which we attribute necessity in (P_2) are simply not identical. The first is, according to the Widescopist, a descriptive proposition of a particular kind, whereas the second is a singular proposition:

According to the analysis, the truth of P_2 requires the necessity of that which is expressed by the open formula (x exists $\supset Fx$), relative to an assignment to the variable ‘ x ’ of the unique object which is (actually) G .¹⁹⁷

But this is not an analysis which would be endorsed by Russell. The truth of (P_2) requires that some actual object in the range of the variable satisfies the open formula

$$Gx \ \& \ (\forall y)(Gy \supset x=y) \ \& \ [\Box (x \text{ exists} \supset Fx)]$$

Putting the point this way precludes an (incorrect) interpretation of Widescopism as a variant of direct reference theory, where the object assigned to the variable in the scope of the modal adverb is initially selected in virtue of matching the description associated with the name. We cannot, if we want to be faithful to the initial impetus of Widescopism, interpret the variable in this way since this would make the proposition singular in the sense that, should there be no actual unique F , the open formula would come out as meaningless. Thus, saying that the G

¹⁹⁷ Soames, “The Modal Argument,” 11.

(read à la Widescopism) is possibly F does not mean that *of* the G it is said to be possibly F .

What is in fact said is that the object which is the only G is also possibly F .

The thought behind Soames' argument seems to be:

- (1) Bill's assertion is about a specific object.
- (2) The description is not about any specific object.
- (3) Therefore, the only part of the Widescopist rendition that can salvage the idea that Bill's assertion is about a specific object is the open formula, where the unbound variable, under the given interpretation ("of the G "), contributes an object to the proposition expressed.

But assuming the first premise begs the question against Widescopism. It is obvious that, if ordinary proper names are about individuals the way Soames think they are, then Widescopism and, more generally, any variant of Russellian Descriptivism are incorrect.¹⁹⁸

Widescopism can indeed symbolize the intuitive argument about Bill's statement as valid. The first two sentences will be represented as

(P₁') Bill asserted [that: (the x : Gx) (x exists $\supset Fx$)]

(P₂') (the x : Gx) \square (x exists $\supset Fx$)

If we define a description associated with the name as one that takes wide scope over modal adverbs, then *by definition* "(the x : Gx) $\square Fx$ " is the result of prefixing the sentence "(the x : Gx) Fx " with the modal adverb "necessarily".

¹⁹⁸ See also Sosa for a similar remark concerning Kripke: "...[O]n Russell's theory (and to *assume* its falsity would beg the question), ordinary proper names are not represented *logically* by an individual constant (and it is at the level of *logical* form that the relevant scope ambiguities arise)." (Sosa, "Rigidity in the Scope of Russell's Theory," 11)

A similar question-begging argument is made in the more straightforward article “Against Widescopism,” where Ben Caplan attempts to show that, if Widescopism is tenable, then it becomes a stylistic variant of the Direct Reference theories. Caplan sets out to do this, by showing that a Descriptivist has to extend the Widescopist treatment to quotation marks, propositional complementizers such as “that,” and names embedded in Widescopist descriptions.

Let us assume that Widescopism must be so strengthened. Suppose the description synonymous with the name “Aristotle” is “the teacher of Alexander” and consider the following two sentences:

- (1) Aristotle taught Alexander.
- (2) The teacher of Alexander taught Alexander.

According to Widescopism,

- (T) (1) is synonymous with (2).

But then, assuming the strengthened version of Widescopism outlined above, this very sentence comes out as saying that

- (T') The teacher of Alexander_i and the teacher of Alexander_j are such that the sentence “He_i taught Alexander” is synonymous with the sentence “He_j taught Alexander.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ Caplan, “Against Widescopism,” 185.

The problem is that neither of the two embedded sentences seems to have a descriptive content. Caplan states that the personal pronoun in the sentence “He_i taught Alexander” does not inherit the descriptive content of the description that binds the pronoun since if it did, then

- (i) The teacher of Alexander_i is such that, necessarily, if there is a unique teacher of Alexander, then he_i taught Alexander.

would be true, because it would be equivalent to

- (ii) Necessarily, if there is a unique teacher of Alexander, then the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander.

This is held to pose a serious problem for a Descriptivist since he would like to hold that an utterance of either “Aristotle taught Alexander” or “The teacher of Alexander taught Alexander” has a descriptive content.

Caplan assumes that a sentence containing a wide scope description embeds in exactly the same way in which one containing a name apparently does. The sentence “*Fa*” seems to embed in a modal context in a rather straightforward fashion: it is a part of “Possibly *Fa*” (deleting “possibly” will also leave a complete linguistic unit in place). However, if Widescopism is correct, then one should not expect a similar phenomenon to take place at the level of the logical form, because “Possibly *Fa*” turns out in fact to have the form “The *G* is such that, possibly, it is *F*.” It would be a misunderstanding of the Widescopist tenet to say that this version of Descriptivism cannot succeed in depicting the sentence “*Fa*” as having a descriptive content, because the only modally embedded counterpart at the level of the logical

form is an open formula, expressing a singular proposition, where the object assigned to the free variable happens to be the actual G . What one should instead say is that the entire sentence “Possibly Fa ” is paraphrased as “The G is such that, possibly, it is F .”

Caplan expects to find in (T’), within quotation marks, sentences which would express the meaning of (1) or (2). What he does find are open formulae bound by an existential quantifier. Yet, as in the case of “ Fa ” and “Possibly, Fa ,” it is misguided to match the meaning of the sentence “ He_i taught Alexander” with that of the sentence “Aristotle taught Aristotle.” Widescopism, in whatever form Caplan would like to recast it, stays true to Russell’s original insight, namely, that a sentence containing a description can only be contextually defined, and that it would be a mistake to look for a unit within the existentially quantified formula that would match the description. These being said, it follows that within the context of (T), the description takes wide scope as shown in (T’), with the caveat that it is the entirety of (T) which is paraphrased in (T’) and that there should be no expectation that parts to be found at the surface level of (T) will be matched by parts occurring at the level expounded by (T’).

To put the point in a different way, if Caplan is right, then he should not have troubled himself with propounding and rejecting so many versions of Widescopism. He could have as well pointed out that in the sentence “The G is such that, possibly, it is F ”, which stands for “Possibly, n is F ,” the part which follows the modal operator does not have a descriptive content and, thus, fails to answer to the very demand of Descriptivism.

4.6 WIDESCOPISM AND BELIEF CONTEXTS

One of the original motivations in propounding Descriptivism was the observation that, if co-referential names make the same semantic contribution, then, if S believes that a is F , he should also believe that b is F , provided that a and b refer to the same individual.

However, as Frege noted, it is possible for one to believe at the same time that the Morning Star is a body illuminated by the Sun, but reject the related thought that the Evening Star is a body illuminated by the Sun.²⁰⁰

Soames argues that Widescopism is bound to view the description associated with a name as taking narrow scope in propositional attitude contexts.²⁰¹ If one upholds the principle that names have descriptive content, then one can avoid the conclusion that belief contexts are transparent to substitution of co-referential terms, only by giving the description associated with a name narrow scope regarding the attitudinal verb.

This idea had already been endorsed by many Descriptivists, because of their commitment to explain the apparent meaningfulness of sentences containing empty names. If the description is allowed to take wide scope over the propositional attitude verb, then, whenever the description does not pick anything (and the name is empty), the resulting translation will issue in a falsehood. Plato can believe that Zeus is a vengeful god, even though there is nothing which is the most powerful Greek god (assuming this is the associated description) such that Plato believes that he is vengeful. The commitment to assign the associated description only narrow scope in attitudinal contexts may be viewed as expressing the same kind of philosophical resistance to Millian approaches, which is salient in Frege's puzzle.

Descriptions associated with names are to be given narrow scope in propositional attitude contexts. However, the same descriptions are to be give wide scope when the names they abbreviate are embedded in a modal context. Soames thinks that these two opposing requirements can spell trouble for Widescopism, because it is easy to consider examples of intuitively valid arguments where attitudinal constructions are placed in the scope of modal operators. Thus, the following argument

²⁰⁰ Frege, "On Sense and Reference," 179.

²⁰¹ Soames, "The Modal Argument," 4-5.

- (i) Necessarily, if Bill believes/asserts that n is F and n is F , then Bill asserted/believed something true

is symbolized by Widescopism as

- (i_w) (the x : Gx) \square [(Bill asserts/believes [that: (the y : Gy) Fy] & Fx) \supset ($\exists p$) [(Bill asserts/believes p) & p is true]].

Similarly, the intuitively valid inference

- (ii) Necessarily, if Bill asserts (believes) that n is F , and everything Bill asserts (believes) is true, then n is F .

is symbolized as

- (ii_w) (the x : Gx) \square [(Bill asserts/believes [that: (the y : Gy) Fy] & (p) [(Bill asserts/believes p) \supset p is true]) \supset Fx].²⁰²

Soames finds such symbolizations faulty in two regards. First, because they depict the initial arguments as stating the existence of a unique actual G , they have to present as false any statement where an empty name is used within the scope of a modal adverb and outside the scope of a propositional attitude verb. Soames is careful not to state that sentences embedding such empty names are unambiguously true and refrains from presenting this as a

²⁰² Soames, “The Modal Argument,” 12.

final argument. What he says is rather that “If proper names of this sort exist in English, then the wide-scope analysis is false.”²⁰³ I will return to this idea in the final section.

The second reason is that, if G is not an essential property of n and F and G are not necessarily co-instantiated, the Widescopist rendition of the two above arguments is not valid. But one can still argue that taking Widescopism seriously means allowing the description to take wide scope over every speech part embedded in the modal context, attitude verbs included. Thus, in a reply to Soames’ criticism, Sosa states that from the fact that a description normally takes narrow scope in propositional attitude constructions it does not follow that the description must *always* take narrow scope in such cases

As a matter of fact, although on the wide-scope analysis, descriptions occurring within the scope of attitude verbs are not required to take wide scope, that is still permissible. Those descriptions can be viewed as having both scopes available.²⁰⁴

The idea is to insist that the symbolization sanctioned by Widescopism for the first argument is

$$(i_w'') \text{ (the } x: Gx) \sqcap [(Bill \text{ asserts/believes [that: } Fx] \ \& \ Fx) \supset (\exists p)[(Bill \text{ asserts/believes } p) \ \& \ p \text{ is true}]]$$

which would account for the intuitive validity of the inference when couched in natural language. Let us assume, therefore, that the rule for assigning scope to descriptions associated with names can be formulated as follows:

(WDB) The description associated with a name is to take wide scope only when the sentence containing the name is in the scope of a modal operator.

²⁰³ Ibid., 13.

²⁰⁴ Sosa, “Rigidity in the Scope of Russell’s Theory,” 32.

It follows from the above that, when the description is embedded in a propositional attitude construction which is not itself in the scope of a modal operator, the description takes narrow scope. This result matches the initial recommendation made by classical Descriptivism. However, I believe this answer would expose Widescopism to a number of difficulties which would make it resemble more direct reference theories, rather than classical Descriptivism.

First, it should be noted that it is very difficult to interpret the content of Bill's belief (or assertion) as anything but a singular proposition. Widescopism could reject a similar charge when expounding on the content of "Possibly Aristotle was wise," i.e., "There is a unique teacher of Alexander such that it is possible that he was wise." The reply had it that it would be a distortion of Russell's insight that descriptions do not refer to construe the proposition as saying *of* the actual teacher of Alexander that it is possible that he was wise. But such leeway seems to be missing here. The problem arises from the fact that if it is held that (i_w') uncovers the logical form of the natural language argument expressed in (i), then it should also be accepted that the logical form of one's belief when the attitude report is embedded in a modal context is

S believes that: *x* is *F*.

This is an unwelcome result for a Widescopist because the following argument can then be mounted:

1. The content of one's belief that Aristotle is wise when embedded in a modal context is a singular proposition.
2. The content of one's belief that Aristotle is wise when embedded in a modal context is identical to the content of one's belief that Aristotle is wise.

3. Therefore, the content of one's belief that Aristotle is wise is a singular proposition.
4. But the content of one's belief that p and the proposition that p are identical (that is, what one believes is that p).
5. Therefore, the proposition that Aristotle is wise is singular.

One could try to block the argument by denying premise 4. But note that even if we allow this move to go unchallenged, the intermediary conclusion expressed at 3 still comes as an embarrassment for a Widescopist, because he will have to hold that, whereas the proposition that Aristotle is wise is not singular, it becomes so when it is the object of one's belief. While this is not a decisive argument per se, it shows that Widescopism has to put forth a more complicated account of belief contexts and give up the original simplicity of the explanation offered by classical Descriptivism.

The second problem raised by the attempt to allow descriptions to take wide scope over attitude verbs is that belief reports embedding an empty name will always be false provided that they are in the scope of a modal operator. It cannot be possible for Bill to believe that Santa Claus has a beard because the proposition expressed by this belief ascription is that there is a unique jolly, fat man bringing gifts to children such that there is at least one possible world where Bill believes that he (the actual jolly fat man) has a beard.

The third weakness of the proposal under consideration is that Widescopism endorsing *WDB* cannot handle modified Frege's puzzles, where the attitudinal verb is in the scope of a modal operator. Classical Descriptivism is able to handle Frege's puzzles because the pair of co-referring names was matched with a pair of associated descriptions. Thus, S can believe that the Morning Star is beautiful and the Evening Star is not beautiful, because, for Russell, the propositions believed are 1) that there is a unique object which can be seen in the

morning in a certain part of the sky and which is beautiful and 2) that there is another object which can be seen in the evening in another part of the sky and which is not beautiful.

But by allowing the description to take wide scope over attitude verbs, the version of Widescopism that we investigate here cannot exhibit a similar flexibility. Consider the following sentence:

It is possible that Bill believes that the Morning Star is beautiful and that Bill believes that the Evening Star is not beautiful.

Let us symbolize the two associated descriptions with “the x : MSx ” and “the x : ESx .” Then the above sentence becomes

(the x : MSx)(the y : ESy) \Diamond (Bill believes that x is beautiful and Bill believes that y is not beautiful).

But the same object fits both descriptions at this world. Since the propositions that Bill believes at some possible world are singular, Widescopism cannot re-use the descriptive contents associated with the co-referring names. It follows that at some world Bill holds inconsistent beliefs.

The moral is that, by endorsing *WDB*, Widescopism may well avoid Soames’ third argument, but only at the cost of foregoing the more natural explanation to Frege’s puzzles. The same point can be made if we contemplate how a modal operator affects identity statements embedded in an attitudinal context. Consider the following statement:

Possibly, Bill believes that the Morning Star is not (identical with) the Evening Star

and suppose, as before, that the two associated descriptions are “the x : MSx ” and “the x : ESx .” Widescopism allowing descriptions to take wide scope over attitude verbs will symbolize the sentence as

$$(\exists x)(\exists z)[MSx \ \& \ (\forall y)(MSy \supset x=y) \ \& \ ESz \ \& \ (\forall w)(ESw \supset z=w) \ \& \ \Diamond S \text{ believes that } x \neq y]$$

and it is obvious that the formula expresses a false proposition. It may be instructive to compare the above with the sentence “The Morning Star is not the Evening Star,” that is,

$$(\exists x)(\exists z)[MSx \ \& \ (\forall y)(MSy \supset x=y) \ \& \ ESz \ \& \ (\forall w)(ESw \supset z=w) \ \& \ x \neq z].$$

Received wisdom holds that the proposition expressed by this sentence may be the object of one’s belief, even if it happens to be false at this world, because there could be another arrangement of objects and properties which would make the proposition true, that is, that the content of what is believed is possible:

$$\text{At some possible world } w: \text{ it is true that } (\exists x)(\exists z)[MSx \ \& \ (\forall y)(MSy \supset x=y) \ \& \ ESz \ \& \ (\forall w)(ESw \supset z=w) \ \& \ x \neq z].$$

But because Widescopism must read the associated descriptions as having wide scope, this becomes in turn:

$$(\exists x)(\exists z)[MSx \ \& \ (\forall y)(MSy \supset x=y) \ \& \ ESz \ \& \ (\forall w)(ESw \supset z=w) \ \text{such that at some possible world } w: \text{ it is true that } x \neq z].$$

Because there is no pair of objects which would satisfy the open formula obtained by quantifier elimination, Widescopism has to deal with the same problem as the direct reference theory, namely, of explaining how one can believe at a possible world that a planet is not identical to itself. Widescopism can dabble in pragmatics at this point and hint at the notion that scope ambiguity may be responsible for the apparent intelligibility of one's belief at another world that the Morning Star is not the Evening Star, but this already means giving up the thesis that one can rationally believe, not only here, but at any other world, that the Morning Star is not the Evening Star.

4.7 A VARIANT OF RICHARD'S THEORY OF BELIEF ASCRIPTION

All the above reasons indicate, I believe, that Widescopism cannot avoid Soames' third criticism by endorsing the *WDB* principle. Yet there is an open question if allowing a description to take wide scope over attitude verbs is the only way one can tackle this problem. Russellian Descriptivism was originally designed as part of a wider project of grounding the investigation of all philosophical problems, be they semantic, epistemological, or metaphysical in a subject-centered analysis. The activities of the subject were interpreted in an anti-psychologistic reading, shared with Frege, as operations of an ideally rational agent, who is to bear the ultimate responsibility for the content of his thoughts or justifications of his beliefs.

When Russell spoke of definite descriptions as giving the meaning of names, he meant descriptions associated by a speaker with a name. The implicit relativization bore testimony to the fact that the analysis is to be couched in terms proprietary to the subject's conceptual system. Russell made it abundantly clear that different subjects may associate different descriptions with the same name and that, most of the time, we usually operate on

the basis of a set of descriptions, rather than a single one. Yet what unifies the distinct uses of different subjects is the fact that all descriptions denote the same object.

Now let us return to Soames' initial premise in the third argument against Widescopism:

Necessarily, if Bill believes that n is F and n is F , then Bill believes something true.

The issue at stake is how to read the fragment "Bill believes n is F ." A proponent of the direct reference theory, such as Soames, may find it natural to interpret the belief report as stating that Bill enters into a belief relation with some singular proposition. This, in turn, would provide us with a simple test for deciding whether, at some other world, Bill holds a belief identical to the belief that we would report here using the same words: if the referent of the name and the property expressed by the predicate letter in the counterfactual situation are identical to the referent and property assigned at the actual world, then both beliefs have the same content, namely, the singular proposition that n is F .

Since it rejects the proposal that sentences containing ordinary proper names express singular propositions, Russellian Descriptivism has to offer a more complex account of identity conditions for beliefs. Consider as an initial example two beliefs at the same world expressed by Bill and John by way of uttering "I believe Aristotle was wise." Suppose they both assign the same property to the predicate. The question of whether they hold the same belief will be settled, then, by answering the question "Do the descriptions associated with the name denote the same individual or not?" If it happens that Bill and John employ exactly the same description, the answer is superfluously yes, but in most cases, as Russell himself noted, this is not true. When the associated descriptions differ in the properties attributed to

the referent of the name, whether the same object is in fact denoted by the two definite descriptions is an open question, which can only be addressed by empirical investigation.

Consider now a modification of this scenario, according to which the beliefs are entertained at different worlds, and let us ask ourselves again “Are the beliefs the same or not?” I think that the correct answer is that we have to determine whether the object denoted at one world by the description Bill associates *there* with the name is identical to the object denoted at the other world by the description used by John *in the second world* (this is often done by mere stipulation).

Let us expand this suggestion into a Descriptivist theory of belief, by borrowing some elements from the theory outlined by Mark Richard in “Propositional Attitudes.” In Richard’s theory, sentences express Russellian annotated matrices (RAMs), which are essentially tuples of Mentalese representations, called “annotations,” and their standard Russellian semantic values. The RAMs for “Hesperus is a planet” and “Phosphorus is a planet” will be, then, distinguished syntactically, by the fact that their Mentalese representations differ. Replacing Mentalese annotations with annotations in English, we can say that the RAMs for the two sentences are:

$\langle\langle\text{‘Hesperus’}, \text{Venus}\rangle, \langle\text{‘is a planet’}, \text{is a planet}\rangle\rangle$

and

$\langle\langle\text{‘Phosphorus’}, \text{Venus}\rangle, \langle\text{‘is a planet’}, \text{is a planet}\rangle\rangle.$

$\langle\text{‘Hesperus’}, \text{Venus}\rangle$ means that the representation of “Hesperus” is assigned the semantic value Venus. $\langle\text{‘is a planet’}, \text{is a planet}\rangle$ interprets the (syntactically individuated) representation “is a planet” as expressing the property of being a planet.

RAMs are also objects of belief. According to the present theory, to say, at the context c , that Henry believes that Hesperus is a planet is to say that the RAM determined by the sentence “Hesperus is a planet” is a contextually correct representation of the RAM that Henry associates in his representational system with the same sentence. The core idea is that each conversational setting is defined by the communicational interests of the subject who makes the attitude ascription and the audience. These interests set certain restrictions on what counts as an acceptable pairing between the RAMs that the subject who makes the ascription, on the one hand, and the person who is the object of ascription, on the other, associate with the that-clause.

In certain contexts, we would like to regard as true the ascription to Lois of the belief that Superman is too shy, even when she formed this opinion by observing Clark Kent’s behavior. The restrictions associated with such contexts would only demand that the annotations for the two names contain the same Russellian interpretation (the same individual). In other contexts, though, when we are more interested, say, in predicting Lois’ behavior when she meets Superman next time, we would not accept that this belief report is true.

Let us define, then, a correlation function as a function from RAMs to RAMs that preserves reference and a restriction as a triple $\langle u, a, S \rangle$, where u is a subject, a is an annotation, and S is a set of annotations. A restriction clarifies which annotation a can be used to represent annotations from u ’s set S . Then Henry’s statement that u believes that Hesperus is a planet is true iff there is a correlation function which obeys the restrictions specific to the context where the belief ascription was formulated which maps the RAM specific to Henry onto the RAM that u associates with the same sentence. Since different communicational contexts may be characterized by different restrictions, Richard’s account implies that one does not simply believe that p , but does believe-at-some-context that p .

If we forego the Russellian analysis of RAMs and replace it with the descriptive content that gives meaning to a use of a proper name, then we can say that *u* believes that Hesperus is a planet iff there is a correlation function which, as before, obeys the relevant contextual restrictions and maps the descriptive RAM that the subject of the utterance associates with “Hesperus is a planet” onto the descriptive RAM that *u* associates with the same sentence.²⁰⁵

4.8 TWO COUNTEREXAMPLES TO WIDESCOPISM

Until now, I have defended Widescopism from a number of charges and argued that they either rely on an incorrect understanding of its main tenets or can be answered to. In this final section, I want to take a look at two problems to which an answer cannot be so easily provided.

Consider the sentence “Possibly, Santa Claus has a beard.” Empty names cannot be accommodated by Widescopism since by definition their associated descriptions do not denote. Widescopism has to give the name “Santa Claus” wide scope over the modal adverb, because the intelligibility of what is said is based on the intelligibility of our utterances regarding Santa Claus. Since any symbolization will begin with, say, “There is at least a unique jolly fat man, who lives at the North Pole and brings Christmas gifts to children” it will come out as false. In other words, it is not true that, possibly, Santa Claus has a beard.

²⁰⁵ I must say that I view this only as a temporary deflection of Soames’ criticism. I do not believe that Richard’s theory is correct. Let me mention only two potential problems. The first is that I do not see why the correlation function must preserve reference. Suppose Lois comes to believe that Superman is Lex Luthor. Then I would be inclined to think that the contextual restrictions should also allow for <“Superman”, Lex Luthor> as an acceptable mapping of the RAM <“Superman”, Superman>. The second is that there seems to me to be a conflict between the way RAMs are identified and the way they are mapped. RAMs specify the representational system of a subject. In determining the RAM for a given name, we do not and cannot rely on the communicational interests of the audience or of the subject making the ascription. Nonetheless, what counts as an acceptable mapping is defined in purely pragmatic terms (Richard at page 135 avowedly rejects the idea that mapping must preserve what is “intrinsic” to the mapped RAMs). Well, then, why could not Russellianism inform a certain communicational background in which one can say of Hammurabi that he believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus? Yet, to refer to Richard’s own words, no one would succeed in making us view the ascription as correct, “other than using bribery, threats, hypnosis, or the like” (125).

Yet the problems raised by empty names do not stop here. Remember that Soames criticizes Widescopism for analyzing sentences containing a name in the scope of a modal operator as stating that the unique *F* exists. Soames does not make it clear what sentences he has in mind but it is important, I think, to note that his comment cannot be so easily dismissed.²⁰⁶ In particular, we cannot simply say with Sosa that it is curious that Soames raises this issue, because he endorses a direct reference theory which is notably known for its counter-intuitive predictions when applied to sentences embedding empty names.²⁰⁷ First, an issue does not stop being one simply because it afflicts the opponent's theory. Second, Soames can still underline that, even if Descriptivism and direct reference theories cannot account for our pre-theoretical intuitions regarding empty names, the latter still win on the whole because they are better equipped to deal with other semantic phenomena such as rigidity.

I think that examples where an empty name is used in what appears to be an instance of a tautology or analytical truth do not fare too well. The problem, as Sosa is keen to note, is that examples such as

It is possible that either Santa Claus is tall or that Santa Claus is not tall.

put such a stress on our intuitions about truth-values that the answer we would give in such circumstances would not be entirely trustworthy.

But there is a class of examples where our intuitions are clearer, namely, that containing sentences such as

It is possible that Santa Claus does not exist.

²⁰⁶ Soames actually attributes the point to Mike Thau.

²⁰⁷ Sosa, "Rigidity in the Scope of Russell's Theory," 33.

The problem raised by such examples is that if the associated description is to take wide scope, as required by the proposal under investigation, the resulting translation is a false sentence (“the *D*” is the associated description)

$$(\exists x)(Dx \ \& \ (\forall y) (Dy \supset x=y) \ \& \ \Diamond \sim(\exists y) y=x)$$

The inference from “*p*” to “Possibly, *p*” cannot be accepted by a Widescopist, when *p* contains an occurrence of an empty name.

The Widescopist may want to postulate here a scope ambiguity and say that the sense in which the sentence is true is that in which we say that

$$\sim (\exists x)(Dx \ \& \ (\forall y) (Dy \supset x=y) \ \& \ \Diamond (\exists y) y=x)$$

(in natural language: it is not true that there is a uniquely jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole such that, possibly, he exists.) But this solution can be criticized twice. First, intuitively, we want to analyze sentences such as “Possibly, Aristotle does not exist” as saying that the teacher of Alexander is such that, possibly, he does not exist or

$$(\exists x)(Txa \ \& \ (\forall y) (Tya \supset x=y) \ \& \ \Diamond \sim(\exists y) y=x).$$

However, this analysis conflicts with the above practice of disambiguating singular negative existential statements containing empty names by giving the negation operator narrow scope and we would like to have a homogenous treatment for all singular negative existential statements. Second, and more importantly, it is simply not clear that the answer would help if somebody wanted to dig in his heels and say “What I want to assert is that, regarding the jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole, there is a possible world where he does not exist *in that*

world.” Therefore, I am inclined to think that empty names pose an insuperable problem to Widescopism.

A second complication arising from the Widescopist analysis is that treating Widescopism as a general semantic theory leads to postulating a difference in content where, intuitively, there is none. I take it as a minimal condition of being a suitable general theory that the theory has counterfactual import, namely, that it can minimally issue a sketch of what a speaker of a possible language would say. Consider now a language spoken at some possible world w , which resembles English with regard to its vocabulary, grammar, and interpretation of all meaningful linguistic units, including the referents of names. Let us call it “Alt-English” and let us assume that the worlds accessible from our world are identical to those accessible from the world where Alt-English is spoken. This possible world is different from ours only in a minute, insignificant detail, which pertains to some hydrogen atom in a far distant galaxy and which does not affect in any way life on Alt-Earth. Intuitively, we would like to say that utterances made in the two languages regarding Aristotle’s wisdom have the same content.

The Direct Reference theory can offer a simple explanation of the intuition that two utterances of “Aristotle is wise,” performed in English and Alt-English, express the same proposition. Since the content of each utterance is obtained by assigning the same object and property to “Aristotle” and “wise,” the proposition expressed in both cases is a combination of the individual Aristotle and wisdom. Content identity is premised on the idea that there is a fact of the matter of whether something is Aristotle (or wisdom), which is not in turn language-specific, that is, which does not fall back on how words are used in English or Alt-English.

Similarly, Classical Descriptivism analyzes the two utterances, performed in distinct languages, as similar iff the description expressed by “Aristotle” in English is identical to that

expressed by “Aristotle” in Alt-English. Suppose they are so, indeed. Content identity, in this case, is premised on the idea that there is a fact of the matter of whether something is one of the universals included in the qualitative specifications.

Now, what is the content of one’s utterance of “Possibly, Aristotle is wise,” made at w and couched in Alt-English, according to Widescopism? It cannot be that the (actual, at our world) teacher of Alexander is such that possibly, he is wise, because it is plain that, in order to have thoughts about Aristotle at w , one does not have to state the existence of an object at our world. It seems to me that the only available answer has to involve taking w , the world where Alt-English is spoken, as the actual world. Let us assume that the subject who uttered the sentence in Alt-English associates the name “Aristotle” with the description “the teacher of Alexander.” Then, “Possibly, Aristotle is wise” means in Alt-English that the person who is the teacher of Alexander at w is possibly wise.

Note, however, that the identity conditions for the content of an utterance of the form “Possibly, Aristotle is F ,” made in Alt-English, include a reference to w as the actual world. On the contrary, the identity conditions for “Possibly, Aristotle is wise,” uttered in English, involve a reference to this world as the actual world. This happens because Widescopism has to arrange the semantic facts about the propositional content of a sentence containing a proper name in such a way that the open formula which results from deleting the leftmost existential quantifier is assessed as satisfied with reference to the domain of the actual world. Since the two propositions include different world-indices, they are, therefore, different. Thus, Widescopism cannot say that the two utterances of “Possibly, Aristotle is wise,” made in English and Alt-English, respectively, convey the same proposition.

There are two avenues that a Widescopist can take at this point. On the one hand, he can flatly deny that a semantic theory has to be extended to possible languages. This, it can be held, is a standard of dubious relevance and failure to meet it should not obstruct the

realization of the fact that Widescopism is an adequate Descriptivist theory for actual languages. But the standard is anything but dubious. We have a very strong intuition that utterances of “Possibly, Aristotle is wise” convey the same information.

On the other hand, the Widescopist can try to avail himself of a notion of character à la Kaplan and say that, even though the two utterances differ in content, they have the same character in the same way in which two utterances of “I am thirsty,” made by different subjects, express different information, but share a linguistic commonality. But then again, it seems implausible to say that the only thing the utterances have in common is that they share some type of inter-linguistic meaning. We started with the observation that nothing seems fundamentally different between what is said in English and Alt-English. We end up accounting for this intuition in terms of language isomorphism. A theory may be bound to forego the wealth of common-sense intuitions in order to preserve coherence, but it should strive to work with a chisel, not with a hatchet. Widescopism cannot function as a general semantic theory. It cannot give a straightforward explanation of how singular negative existential statements containing empty names function either. I believe we have good reasons to search for an alternative.

CHAPTER 5 – RIGIDIFIED DESCRIPTIVISM

5.1 *DTHAT-TERMS*

One of the central premises of the modal argument is the assumption that the definite descriptions ordinarily associated with names are not rigid. In this chapter I shall examine Rigidified Descriptivism, a variety of Descriptivism which rejects this assumption. One proposal to ensure that the associated descriptions are rigid is to let them have the form *Dthat* [*the D*]. “Dthat” is a technical term originally introduced by Kaplan in his eponymous paper as part of an attempt to clarify Donnellan’s referential use of a definite description.²⁰⁸ Although it was initially designed to play a limited theoretical role, by the time “Demonstratives” was published, Kaplan would come to regard the operator as expressing the general form of a demonstrative.²⁰⁹ In “Demonstratives,” Kaplan formally treats extralinguistic demonstrations which complete tokened demonstratives on a par with definite descriptions. In this sense, the use of the definite description such as “the teacher of Alexander the Great” in “Dthat [the teacher of Alexander the Great]” is similar to pointing to whoever happens to satisfy the properties mentioned in the description.

Kaplan later acknowledged that there are two possible ways of interpreting *dthat*, as a syntactically complete singular term or as an operator on descriptions. According to Kaplan’s original intention, *dthat*-terms are directly referential terms. When they are construed along this line, the descriptive material mentioned in a *dthat*-term is effaced at the level of content, because the description serves only to identify the relevant object. The proposition expressed concerns (is about) this object, not the qualitative complex mentioned in the description. *Dthat*-terms are, thus, a species of directly referential terms: if the description is improper,

²⁰⁸ Kaplan, “Dthat,” 292-305.

²⁰⁹ See Kaplan, “Demonstratives,” 521-522 and “Afterthoughts,” 578-590.

there is no object secured as propositional constituent and, therefore, there is nothing that can be assessed as true or false at a given world.

Although this construal grants a role to the definite description, it does not do it in a way which could be espoused by a Descriptivist. In fact, this interpretation of *dthat*-terms can be thoroughly embraced by a supporter of the direct reference theory for names. Following Kaplan, let us distinguish between the character of an indexical or demonstrative and its content. The content or the semantic value is what accounts for the intentional features of the proposition expressed. The content of “I” in the utterance “I was born in Romania” as used by me is Șerban, while the proposition expressed is that Șerban was born in Romania. The content of the same word (type) in a similar utterance made by Henry is Henry, because his utterance concerns (is about) himself. The two utterances are, therefore, different at the level of the information conveyed (how the world is represented). However, one can express the commonality between them by saying that the linguistic rule for using the personal pronoun “I” is that a token of “I” has as semantic value the agent of the relevant context. Kaplan calls this function that assigns agents to tokens of the personal pronoun “the character” of the pronoun.²¹⁰ The character of an indexical can be thought of as the rule that instructs a speaker of the language on utilizing correctly the indexical. In general, given that the relevant context is identified, a token of “I” will be assigned the agent of the context, a token of “now” the time, and a token of “here” the place of the context. Note that in this interpretation indexicals are semantically similar to unbound variables that range over a specific domain (subjects, moments, or places).

The context provides values for indexicals or demonstratives. The circumstance of evaluation, in contrast, provides the evaluation of the proposition determined by this process of assigning content. The context may not always be identical to the circumstance of

²¹⁰ But see Braun, “What is Character?,” regarding Kaplan’s attempt to define character without relativizing it to a structure.

evaluation. To build on the above example, the proposition expressed by my utterance of “Possibly, I was born in Romania” is that there is a possible world in which Șerban is born in Romania. The context provides a value for the tokened “I” that determines a specific content and, thus, a specific proposition (that Șerban is born in Romania). This proposition is afterwards evaluated at different possible worlds in the customary way: it is true with respect to a world w iff with respect to w Șerban is born in Romania. Confusing the context of utterance with the circumstance of evaluation may lead one to the mistaken idea that one first needs to determine the subject who utters “I” in a given world w in order to determine the proposition expressed. This is manifestly incorrect. It is irrelevant for the evaluation at w of the proposition expressed by my utterance whether or not somebody may utter “I” at w .

The difference between indexicals and demonstratives consists in that, while the former are assigned the relevant contextual values, the latter need to be completed, usually by a demonstration. Kaplan’s idea was to treat descriptions as playing the same role as a demonstration in securing a semantic value at the level of character:

The word “dthat” was intended to be a surrogate for a true demonstrative, and the description which completes it was intended to be a surrogate for the completing demonstration. On this interpretation “dthat” is a syntactically complete singular term that requires no *syntactical* completion by an operand. (A “pointing”, being extralinguistic, could hardly be a part of the syntax.) The description completes the *character* of the associated occurrence of “dthat”, but makes no contribution to content... “Dthat” is no more an operator than is “I”, though neither has a referent unless semantically “completed” by a context in the one case and a demonstration in the other.²¹¹

A Descriptivist should not equate names with such dthat-terms, because, in this construal, names turn out to be terms of direct reference. For Kaplan a dthat-term is syntactically complete. The presence of the description in the nomenclature of the term can

²¹¹ Kaplan, “Afterthoughts,” 581.

be, at most, viewed as a mnemonic device for the linguistic rule that is instrumental in designating a particular individual at the context of use.

However, there is a second interpretation of *dthat*-terms that the Descriptivist can avail himself of. If we view *dthat* as an operator on definite descriptions, then we can say that

“*Dthat*[the *D*] is *F*” is true at a world *w* iff, at *w*, the object actually denoted by “the *D*” is *F*.

If names are synonymous with *dthat*-descriptions interpreted in this manner, then they are rigid, yet not directly referential. The description is semantically operational because assessing the proposition expressed at a given world involves assessing whether the unique *D* in the actual world has the property *F* in the specified circumstance of evaluation:

Complete *dthat*-terms would be rigid, in fact *obstinately* rigid. In this case, the proposition would not carry the individual itself into a possible world but rather would carry instructions to run back home and get the individual who there satisfies certain specifications. The complete *dthat*-term would then be a rigid description which induces a complex “representation” of the referent into the content.²¹²

It is interesting to note that Kaplan thinks that interpreting *dthat* as an operator on a description yields an obstinate designator, that is, a rigid designator which designates the same object at all worlds, whether the denotation of the description exists at those worlds or not. This suggests that we are not bound to read the right-side of the above clause as stating that

“*Dthat*[the *D*] is *F*” is true at a world *w* iff there is an object in *w* which is the unique *D* in the actual world and which is also *F* in *w*.

²¹² Ibid., 580.

Instead, we can hold that the quoted sentence is true at a world w iff the (actual) D is F in w . I will return to this reading in this chapter when discussing Branquinho's criticism of Rigidified Descriptivism.

5.2 THE ACTUAL F

A second strategy for defending Descriptivism from the modal argument is to hold that the descriptions associated with a name have the form “the actual F .” The operator “Actually” is semantically similar to indexicals. Just as “I” is associated with the linguistic rule “the person who utters ‘I,’” “actually” is associated with the rule “the world where the utterance takes place.” According to the model used for indexicals, “actually” is assigned a value at the context of utterance, such that a sentence of the form “Actually, s ” expresses the proposition that s is true at the world of utterance. For instance, “Actually, Nixon was Republican” as uttered in our world determines the singular proposition that in our world Nixon was a Republican.

The semantics for this operator is given by

“Actually, s ” is true at a world w iff at w s is true in the actual world.

The direct consequence of this clause is that if s is true in the actual world, then the sentence “Actually, s ” expresses a necessary truth. The truth of the complex sentence depends on how the simpler sentence is evaluated at the actual world, and the only relevant facts that can decide the truth-value of the embedded sentence are those that obtain in the actual world.

Pursuing this approach at a sub-sentential level, we may define a counterpart of “Actually, s ” for the class of definite descriptions as follows:

“The actual F ” denotes at a given world w an individual i iff “the F ” denotes i at the actual world.

Defining names as definite descriptions rigidified with the operator “actual” implies that their semantics is similar to that of indexicals or demonstratives. We saw that, when using an indexical such as “I,” one can be viewed as being engaged in two types of activity. On the one hand, one can be viewed as stating the proposition resulting from assigning the agent of the context to the tokened pronoun. On the other hand, one can be viewed as applying to the context of utterance the same rule that is applied by another subject who utters the same sentence (type) at a different context. Indexicals and demonstratives are two-dimensional terms. If names are, in fact, rigidified definite descriptions, then they should exhibit a similar behavior.

Consider as an example the names “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” and assume that their associated descriptions are “the actual evening star” and “the actual morning star,” respectively. Then the sentence “Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus” as uttered in our world expresses the proposition that the actual evening star is the actual morning star. Note that, since the two descriptions are rigid, the truth of this identity statement is necessary. In all worlds accessible to ours, it is the case that, here, in our world, the evening star and the morning star are one and the same object. However, had the sentence been uttered by somebody in another world, keeping the associated descriptions constant, it would have meant that the evening star in that world is identical to the morning star in the same world. Suppose it is false that in that world the evening star and the morning star are identical. Then the utterance expresses a necessarily false proposition. Schematically, letting w_1 be our world and w_2 the world where the evening star is different from the morning star, we can represent the assignment of truth-values as follows:

Hesperus is Phosphorus = The actual evening star is the actual morning star

	w_1	w_2
w_1	T	T
w_2	F	F

Given that we identify the relevant context of use, the horizontal lines model the traditional notion of content (a function from possible worlds to truth-values). However, if we decide to capture the further notion that the meaning of a sentence depends also on how we use the words comprising it, then we have to depict the information conveyed by “Hesperus is Phosphorus” as the above two-dimensional matrix, allowing that, in other worlds, the descriptions we associate here with the two names might have denoted different objects. The two-dimensional matrix represents a function from possible worlds, which fix the content of use for “actual,” to functions from possible worlds to truth-values. Whether viewing names as two-dimensional terms is further proof of the soundness of Rigidified Descriptivism depends on one’s view of how we should interpret a two-dimensional matrix. Kaplan interprets the character as conveying the linguistic meaning associated with an indexical or demonstrative.²¹³ To give another example, Chalmers develops an account of two-dimensional semantics that makes use of epistemic possibilities, that is, what appears possible to a subject upon rational examination.²¹⁴ Finally, Stalnaker adopts an externalist reading of the two-dimensional matrix in which the diagonal proposition is arrived at via a process of reinterpretation, dictated by prima facie violations of conversational rules.²¹⁵

²¹³ To be sure, a supporter of Rigidified Descriptivism would jettison singular propositions, but retain the proposal that character models knowledge of linguistic rules.

²¹⁴ Chalmers, “The Foundations of Two-Dimensional Semantics,” “The Components of Content,” “Two-Dimensional Semantics.”

²¹⁵ Stalnaker, “Assertion Revisited,” 300. For Stalnaker, an assertion is an exclusion from the possible situations compatible with the context of utterance of those situations in which the asserted proposition is false. The problem raised by utterances such as “Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus” is that, on the one hand, they are necessarily true and, thus, cannot exclude any possible situation and, on the other hand, they are asserted as informative, which means that they seem to exclude some other possibilities. Stalnaker proposes to resolve this

5.3 NAMES AS OBSTINATE DESIGNATORS

We are now in a position to review two arguments against Rigidified Descriptivism. According to the first argument, Rigidified Descriptivism is untenable on semantic grounds, because it implies that names are persistent, and not obstinate, designators. According to the second argument, Rigidified Descriptivism cannot account for belief ascriptions in modal contexts. In this section I will deal with the first line of attack.

Soames mentions in passing that Rigidified Descriptivism implies that names are persistent designators and notes, following Kaplan and Salmon,²¹⁶ that there are strong arguments in support of the view that names are, in fact, obstinate designators.²¹⁷ A persistent designator is one that designates the same object at any world where the object exists and nothing at worlds where the designatum does not exist, while an obstinate designator designates the same object at any world, whether the designatum exists or not.

The description “the actual *D*” denotes at a world *w* iff the domain of *w* contains an existent that is in our world the only *D*. If the actual *D* does not exist at *w*, then the description fails to denote anything there. Assuming that names are synonymous with rigidified descriptions, at worlds where a name’s referent does not exist, the name fails to refer. Rigidified Descriptivism would, thus, entail that names are persistent designators.

The case against this conclusion can be built by noting the similarities between the modal and temporal profiles of names. Names refer to the same object across different

apparent conflict by reinterpreting an utterance of “Hesperus is Phosphorus” as asserting not the singular proposition that Venus is identical to itself, but the diagonal proposition. Suppose Henry finds out that Paul thinks that Hesperus is not identical to Phosphorus and, keen to correct the mistake, states “Of course Hesperus is Phosphorus.” Stalnaker thinks that what Henry and Paul argue over is the diagonal proposition in the above matrix. The point of Henry’s assertion is to exclude the possible situations consistent with Paul’s statement, where the two names label different objects. Note that, in this interpretation, two-dimensional matrices (propositional concepts, as Stalnaker calls them) are built from singular propositions, as in Kaplan’s theory. This bottom-up approach signals that Stalnaker views the construction of a two-dimensional matrix as a process derivative from Millian semantics and Gricean rules of communication. Intentionality is still a matter of knowing who or what the referent of a name is, that is, intentionality is still elucidated by direct assignment of values to names.

²¹⁶ Kaplan, “Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice” and Salmon, “Reference and Essence,” 32-40.

²¹⁷ Soames, “The Modal Argument: Wide Scope and Rigidified Descriptions,” 14.

periods in the history of a world in the same way in which they refer to the same object across different possible worlds. In saying “Aristotle is a subtle philosopher,” Henry does not imply that the referent of the name has to be identified by determining first the time of the utterance and then by discovering to which person the name is applied at that time. Rather, the name “Aristotle” receives a referent at a certain point in the history of this world and all subjects who employ it agree to abide by the rule to refer to the same person that was then assigned as the referent of the name. Names are temporally rigid.

Note, however, that we can speak now of people who do not exist any longer. We can say “Aristotle is dead,” even if the current temporal context of utterance does not include the referent of the name. Names, in other words, are obstinately temporal rigid designators. If the parallel between the modal and the temporal discourses holds, then names should be obstinately modal rigid designators as well.

Consider the sentence “Hitler was never born.” Surely, it expresses a proposition true with respect to some possible worlds, namely, those whose domains do not include Hitler. If the name “Hitler” does not designate with respect to such a world, then the proposition expressed is either lacking a truth value (no referent, no content expressed) or is false. Both options appear counter-intuitive, however. There does appear to be information transmitted with regard to that world by the above sentence, so there is an appearance that content was linguistically encoded. At the same time, one would have to be a remarkably talented rhetor to convince us of the fact that the proposition expressed is false. Since both alternatives seem at variance with common sense, we should accept that the name “Hitler” does designate with respect to that world. It would appear, therefore, that names are obstinate designators and that Rigidified Descriptivism is false.

Jason Stanley thinks that we can avoid the above argument by holding that the use of non-denoting terms leads to expressing false propositions.²¹⁸ The suggestion, which was explored in depth by advocates of free logic, would allow us to maintain that (false) information was conveyed, in the absence of denotation. Since the sentence “Hitler was never born” is the negation of “Hitler was born,” the policy of counting the latter (simple) sentence as false would imply that the composed sentence is true and this is the result that we intuitively think is correct. Similarly, we can count the sentence “Aristotle is dead” as the negation of the sentence “Aristotle is alive.” If we extend the free logic approach to temporal logic, then the second sentence will be counted as false at a time when “Aristotle” does not denote and the original one will turn out to be true. Free logic allows us to make sense of the idea that names are persistent designators.

Stanley’s answer is based on the assumption that the name “Hitler” is non-denoting at a world because, *in* that world, there is no one denoted by the name. João Branquinho has charged that support for this thesis can only stem from confusing the context of use with the circumstance of evaluation.²¹⁹ Just because the name does not refer to anyone *in* that world, it does not mean that it does not refer to someone *with respect to* that world. In fact, it does refer to a person with respect to a world where Hitler does not exist - namely, to Hitler himself.

The Kaplanian distinction between the context of utterance and the circumstance of evaluation was originally presented when developing a semantics for indexicals and demonstratives that would preserve the intuition that tokens of such terms are rigid designators. We distinguished between the level of assigning a value to a tokened indexical or demonstrative and the level of evaluating the proposition thus defined as true or false relative to given worlds. The truth-value of the proposition depends, as usual, on facts

²¹⁸ Stanley, “Names and Rigidified Designation,” 567.

²¹⁹ Branquinho, “In Defence of Obstinacy.”

obtaining at the circumstance of evaluation. The identity of the proposition, however, depends on the initial assignment of values at the context of utterance and has nothing to do with what is the case at the circumstance of evaluation.

Branquinho wants to extend this model to proper names. This is, in itself, debatable, because one may deny that the context of determining a name's referent plays a semantic role in the functioning of the name. It is apparent how distinguishing between context and circumstance can explain why names are obstinate designators. Indexicals and demonstratives are obstinate designators. The proposition expressed by my utterance of "I was born in Romania" is obtained by assigning to the tokened indexical the agent of the context. The proposition expressed is about this person, whether or not he exists at the circumstance of evaluation. When the proposition is evaluated with respect to a circumstance where the speaker does not exist, the proposition expressed already comprises him as a constituent in virtue of the initial assignment.

If we pursue the analogy suggested by Branquinho, then the proposition expressed by "Hitler was never born" should be obtained by assigning at the context of utterance an individual to the proper name. The proposition expressed will be counted as true at a given world if the individual thus assigned does not have, at that world, the property of being born. As indexicals, names turn out to be obstinate designators: if the original assignment was successful, no change in the way this world is can rob the name of its referent.

However, Soames' remark and Branquinho's elaboration of it assume that a Descriptivist cannot hold that rigidified descriptions are obstinate designators. They both seem to suppose that the truth conditions for a sentence of the form "The actual *D* is *F*" are

"The actual *D* is *F*" is true at *w* iff there is an object *x* at *w* such that *x* is the unique *D* in the actual world and *x* is *F*.

But why do we have to believe that this is correct? Remember that Kaplan specifically allows that that-terms can be obstinately rigid. We can, certainly, reply that the proper schema is

“The actual *D* is *F*” is true at *w* iff the unique *D* in the actual world is *F* at *w*.

Interpreting rigidified descriptions in this manner would allow us to preserve the insight that names are obstinate designators and counter Soames’ and Branquinho’s criticism.

5.4 BELIEF ASCRIPTIONS IN MODAL CONTEXTS

Scott Soames did not elaborate on the previous argument in the manner that Branquinho did because he was convinced that there is a stronger, more damaging reply to Rigidified Descriptivism.²²⁰ If a name *n* is indeed synonymous with a rigidified description “the actual *D*,” then the name and the definite description should be intersubstitutable *salva veritate* in all contexts. Modal constructions verify this prediction since substituting the name with the description in “Possibly, *n* is *F*” leads to “Possibly, the actual *D* is *F*” and, on the assumption that *n* is the actual *D*, the first sentence is true iff the second sentence is true as well. Yet belief (hyperintensional) contexts do not always accommodate the substitution of names with their associated rigidified descriptions. If belief contexts are free of any modal element, then names are indeed substitutable *salva veritate* with rigidified descriptions. Suppose that *S* associates “the actual teacher of Alexander the Great” with the name “Aristotle.” If *S* believes that Aristotle was a philosopher, then *S* also believes that the actual teacher of Alexander the Great was a philosopher.

However, adding modal operators to belief contexts upsets the parallelism between sentences containing names and those containing rigidified descriptions. Aristotle might not

²²⁰ Soames, “The Modal Argument,” 13-17.

have become the teacher of Alexander the Great and might have chosen to focus exclusively on the study of philosophy. In such a world, we could continue having beliefs about everything that we actually do. In fact, we can assume that all our linguistic practices are identical to our current ones. The only difference between this world and ours is Aristotle's decision to become a philosophical hermit. It is intuitively correct to say that in such a circumstance one can entertain the (true) belief that Aristotle is a philosopher. But note that substituting the name with the rigidified description turns

In w , S believes that Aristotle is a philosopher.

into

In w , S believes that the actual teacher of Alexander the Great is a philosopher.

Rigidified Descriptivism seems to require subjects in this possible world to entertain a belief about what is going on in our world in order to have a thought about Aristotle. This is obviously incorrect. Attributing to one inhabitant of another world the belief that Aristotle is a philosopher should not require that he have the uncanny ability to conceive something obtaining at a world different from that in which his belief is formed. More generally, for every name n and associated description *the actual* D , Soames' argument is:

- (1) In w , S believes that n is F .
- (2) In w , S does not believe anything about our world.

- (3) If S believes that s at w , then S enters into the belief relation with the proposition expressed by s at w (believing is a relation between a subject and the proposition expressed by s).
- (4) Thus, S enters into the belief relation with the proposition expressed by “ n is F ” at w .
- (5) The proposition expressed by “ n is F ” at w is that n is F .
- (6) (Rigidified Descriptivism) The proposition that n is F is identical with the proposition that the actual D is F .
- (7) Thus, S enters into the belief relation with the proposition expressed by “The actual D is F ” at w .
- (8) The proposition expressed by “The actual D is F ” is that the unique D at our world is F .
- (9) Thus, at w , S enters into the belief relation with the proposition that the unique D at our world is F .
- (10) If S enters into the belief relation with the proposition that the unique D at our world is F , then S believes something about our world.
- (11) Thus, Rigidified Descriptivism is false: the proposition that n is F is not identical with the proposition that the actual D is F .

Why is this argument so damaging to a Descriptivist? There is a long tradition of viewing Descriptivism as originating in Frege’s discovery of senses as the additional semantic dimension of any term. Frege’s puzzle works precisely by exploiting the discrepancy between how sentences embed in belief contexts and the prediction of any theory that views extension as the sole semantic value of terms. Showing that Descriptivism fails to offer a correct account of belief contexts undermines a guiding principle of this tradition. The

Descriptivist may still claim to have avoided the modal argument, but now his accomplishment begins to look like a Pyrrhic victory rather than an unambiguous triumph.

I want to take a look in what follows at a proposal which purports to avoid the conclusion of Soames' argument. Michael Nelson endorses a variety of Descriptivism that can be described as the rigidified version of Forbes' mental dossier account. Drawing on Evans' remarks in *The Varieties of Reference*, Forbes argued that the proposition that n is F has the same cognitive significance as that of the proposition that the subject of this dossier is F , where the dossier in question is a mental file that the subject keeps of n .²²¹

Nelson considers two versions of Rigidified Forbesian Descriptivism, one that holds that the semantic content of a name is identical to that of the definite description "the actual subject of this dossier" and the other that identifies only the cognitive content of the name with that of the description.²²² If Descriptivism is so couched as to characterize only the cognitive content of a name, then it is compatible with a hybrid view that endorses an analysis of the semantic content of names along the lines of the direct reference approach. However, it seems likely that the real debate concerns Descriptivism as a theory of the semantic content of names and it is here that Soames' argument appears to be devastating.²²³

Nelson thinks that Soames' argument can be rejected by denying premise (3), that is, the premise that believing that p is essentially a relation between a subject and the proposition that p , and he explores two strategies for discarding the premise. Both attempt to sketch a theory of belief, which distinguishes between believing that n is F and believing that the actual subject of this dossier is F , while holding that the embedded that-clauses have the same semantic content.

²²¹ Forbes "The Indispensability of *Sinn*," "Substitutivity and the Coherence of Quantifying In," "Indexicals and Intensionality."

²²² Nelson, "Descriptivism Defended," 416.

²²³ In fact, because Forbes' version of Descriptivism employs a demonstrative ("this dossier"), it appears to rely on the direct reference theory. See Crimmins, "So-Labeled Neo-Fregeanism."

The first option is to deny that believing is always a relation between a subject and a single proposition. Consider the case of somebody who entertains a thought about Aristotle by using a mental dossier comprised of the sole file “the teacher of Alexander the Great.” Imagine now a possible world just like ours where the subject maintains a mental dossier of Aristotle whose single file is “the most philosophically gifted student to attend Plato’s Academy.” Given that the contents of the two files are not identical, it follows that the subject does not grasp the same proposition in both worlds when stating, for instance, that Aristotle was a very subtle metaphysician. However, does it follow that the subject does not have the same belief that Aristotle was a very subtle metaphysician?

Nelson’s first proposal is to view the complement clause of the attitudinal verb as determining a class of propositions that a subject might have entertained in different counterfactual circumstances. Instead of saying that in “*S* believes that *n* is *F*” the that-clause determines the singular proposition that *n* is *F*, we can say that the clause determines the class of descriptive propositions that the subject would entertain about *n* in various possible worlds. That is,

The sentence [*a* believes that *n* is a *G*] is true relative to a [context] *c* and wrt [i.e., with respect to] *w* just in case there is a world-indexed Forbesian proposition *q* in the relevant similarity class *Ψ* such that *A* accepts in *w* *q*.²²⁴

Members of the similarity class *Ψ* have the form [THE *x*: subject of *Y* at *w_x* (*x*)] (*Γ*(*x*)), where:

- *Y* is the variable ranging over mental dossiers of *n* in worlds where agents entertain beliefs about *n*
- *w_x* is a variable ranging over such worlds

²²⁴ Nelson, “Descriptivism Defended,” 420.

- the values of the variables Y and w_x are correlated in that if d is dossier and w is a world, then d is a dossier of n at w (this restriction ensures that we do not take into account the satisfier of the information encoded in the dossier in a world different from that where the dossier is created.)
- Γ is the property expressed by the predicate G

According to this proposal, at a given world w different from our world, the that-clauses in the following two reports designate different propositions:

S believes that n is F

S believes that the actual subject of this dossier is F .

The first that-clause designates the proposition that the subject at world w of dossier M is F . The second clause designates the proposition that the subject at our world of dossier M' is F , where M' is the dossier encapsulating information about n at our world. Soames' argument is, thus, blocked. One can believe at another world that that n is F , without also believing the actual subject of this dossier is F .

The second strategy to block Soames' argument is to deploy Mark Richard's theory from *Propositional Attitudes* in the defense of Rigidified Descriptivism. We touched on Richard's theory when we reviewed a context-sensitive theory of belief ascription that would answer to Soames' third charge against Widescopism. Richard's theory is a variety of belief contextualism in that it formulates the intuition that the truth of belief ascriptions depends on the larger communicational background in which the ascriptions occur.

Nelson himself also suggests that Richard's theory can be safely enlisted to assist Descriptivism, as long as we can view the reports " n is F " and "the actual subject of this

dossier is F ” as issuing in divergent restrictions on the correlation function. A few changes have to be made, though, to accommodate the underlying Descriptivism. First, Richardian annotations have to contain now, not their Russelian interpretation, but the Descriptivist one, most likely, complexes of properties. Second, Nelson defines an annotation as a pair of the complement clause and the proposition that it expresses. Third, unlike in Richard’s theory, propositions keep their classical role of being the contents of sentences and objects of beliefs.

Suppose Henry ascribes to Paul the belief that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician. The correlation function for this report matches the annotation whose descriptive component indicates Henry’s dossier of Aristotle at the context of ascription with the class of annotations of the form [THE x : subject of M at w (x)] (subtle metaphysician (x)), that is, with those annotations mentioning Paul’s dossiers of Aristotle, such that the values of M and w are correlated as explained above. However, the ascription to Paul of the belief that the actual subject of this dossier is a subtle metaphysician utilizes a stronger restriction on the correlation function which matches Henry’s actual dossier of Aristotle with itself. Nelson’s justification is that utilizing a particular form of words (“the actual subject of this dossier”) implies a more specific reading, which builds into the annotation the index of the world where the ascription is made and the specific dossier that was used.

The two restrictions have different effects. The truth of “Paul believes that the actual subject of this dossier is F ” at w requires that Paul’s representational system at w contain a Mentalese sign for our world. In contrast, the truth of “Paul believes that n is F ” at w requires merely that Paul have a dossier of Aristotle at w of the form “the actual subject of this dossier.”

5.5 RIGIDIFIED DESCRIPTIVISM AND CONTENT IDENTITY

If successful, either of Nelson's proposals suffices to block Soames' criticism. I do not think this is the case, but, before I make my case against Nelson's version of Rigidified Descriptivism, I wish to review a number of replies we owe to Anthony Everett.²²⁵ Everett begins his criticism by lodging a complaint that is wholly unspecific to Rigidified Descriptivism or to Nelson's version of it. Suppose that, due to bad memory, I completely forget who Aristotle was and I file only information about Hegel in my mental dossier labeled "Aristotle." I somehow remember that I first heard about Aristotle from my philosophy teacher, but everything he mentioned during the class has been forgotten by me. In spite of the wealth of (incorrect) information I file in the dossier labeled "Aristotle," I am able, nonetheless, to entertain many thoughts that I can verbalize by using this name. In particular, I can express my conviction that the German nation has produced many first-class philosophers, by mentioning that Aristotle, too, was German. Everett thinks that Nelson would encounter serious difficulties in trying to identify the object of my thought. He holds that Nelson can indicate neither Aristotle, because my dossier does not contain information about him, nor Hegel, because this would mean confusing semantic reference (the individual the name refers to) with speaker reference (the individual I believe the name is about).

How serious is this dilemma? Note, first, that this is a generic problem for a Descriptivist, irrespective of whether the description is rigidified or not. Second, it is not clear why one could not dismantle Everett's example by saying that we can identify the object of thought by assessing the overall importance of the descriptions in the cluster associated with the name. When Everett says "It cannot be a dossier of Aristotle for I don't have one," he begs the question by assuming that a dossier is about whoever satisfies (or is

²²⁵ Everett, "Recent Defenses of Descriptivism," 120-125.

causally responsible for) most of the descriptions composing the dossier (or cluster).²²⁶ But if the description “the person whom my philosophy teacher spoke of” is assigned more weight than that of any combination of descriptions in the cluster, then we can easily say that I am thinking about the Greek philosopher. On the other hand, we can allow that, in certain conditions, if a significantly large number of descriptions in the cluster are satisfied by the same object, then the cluster is about that object, and not the individual that others refer to in using the name. If this was so, then my thought would be about Hegel. Everett objects that this is confusing speaker reference with semantic reference. I do not see why one cannot reply by saying that I was using a different name “Aristotle” which is syntactically identical with the one used for the Greek philosopher, and that, due to pragmatic considerations, once I am apprised of the naming policy in my community, I decide to withdraw my label and conform to the public convention.

The second criticism that Everett levels against Nelson’s Descriptivist proposal is a frontal attack on the idea that the notion of mental dossiers can be exploited by the Descriptivist. Suppose Henry is a cognitive psychologist who, during a research on Paul’s mental dossiers, analyzes his dossier of Aristotle and says “The actual subject of this dossier is a subtle metaphysician.” Everett thinks that Paul would express a different proposition by uttering during a philosophy class “Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician.” He does not give any reason for this, but one that comes immediately to mind is that Paul’s statement pertains to Aristotle, whereas Henry’s is about the subject of a mental file.

Imagine, nonetheless, that Henry has the kind of access to Paul’s dossier that Everett supposes him to have. Henry is apprised of the name that Paul keeps of the subject of the dossier, can see the various mental images that are recorded by Paul’s memory, hear sounds from conversations Paul had about Aristotle, and so on. Why would Henry not be exactly in

²²⁶ Everett, “Recent Defenses of Descriptivism,” 120.

the same position as Paul when uttering “Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician”? Henry can certainly produce the name of the person Paul keeps the files for. He has access to the most intimate of Paul’s impressions about Aristotle’s philosophy. One would be hard pressed to find divergence here between Henry’s and Paul’s thoughts.

Everett’s reasons for holding that Henry and Paul do not say the same thing may be in fact related to the third criticism he addresses to Nelson’s proposal. Everett notes that one can be perfectly able to grasp the thought that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician without being sure of what it is to believe that the subject of this dossier is a subtle metaphysician. The point, reminiscent of the criticism of Causal Descriptivism that regular users of names are not philosophically equipped to comprehend the causal theory of names, is that any version of Descriptivism that relies on the concept of a mental dossier burdens the subject with too much knowledge.

However, we can view the phrase “mental dossier” as the expression in philosophical jargon of a common-sense view that we gather information about different individuals. Given that this is true, we can impute to Paul the belief that the subject of his mental dossier (of Aristotle) is a subtle metaphysician without also imputing to him knowledge about cognitive processing. What we are bound to assume, however, is that he must grasp the notion that is philosophically expressed by “mental dossier” whenever he uses names and Everett may reply once again that this implies ascribing again too much knowledge. Yet, I would answer that if one was not able to grasp that which is expressed in philosophical jargon by “mental dossier,” then one would not use names the way we do.

Everett makes a last-ditch effort to buttress his case by asking us to imagine a situation in which two subjects, say, Henry and Paul, are in a room where both can watch on a screen an image of Paul’s dossier of Aristotle (assume that imagining is extremely advanced). Paul does not know he is looking, in fact, at his dossier of Aristotle. Trusting

Henry, he comes to believe that the actual subject of the dossier he is currently watching is a subtle metaphysician. Does he, thereby, believe that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician?

The weak point in this argument is that Paul does not *understand* that which is required by the Descriptivist to grasp in order to have the thought that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician. Paul has only a belief about the subject of the dossier projected on the screen he currently looks at. He does not believe what he would normally express by saying “The actual subject of this dossier is a subtle metaphysician.” Everett interprets “this” in “the actual subject of this dossier” as similar to a pointing, where one could point at a person, without knowing whom he is pointing at (and maybe later discovering that he pointed at somebody he was acquainted with). This is not, however, the way in which the concept of a mental dossier is used by a Descriptivist. A mental dossier is essentially open, i.e., transparent, to the subject. The phrase “this dossier” can be at any time replaced by “the dossier that contains files encoding the following information:” and then one would list the contents of the dossier. Paul, therefore, does not believe anything about the contents of the dossier. Were he to perceive their representations on the screen, were he to inspect the contents of the dossier, listening to sound bites or playing short movies from his memory, where people talk of the subject Paul gathered information about, then he would have exactly the same belief that he has when saying that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician. I conclude that Everett has not shown that Nelson’s version of Rigidified Descriptivism is incorrect.

The fundamental claim in Nelson’s theory is that the content expressed by the sentence “*n* is *F*” is context-sensitive.

The proposition [that the sentence “*n* is *F*” expresses] relative to some context *c* is identical to the proposition expressed by [The actual subject of this dossier is *F*] relative to *c*. Let σ be the agent of the context *c*, and let w^* be the world of *c*. Then this proposition can be represented as [THE *x*: subject of *M* at w^* (*x*)] ($\varphi(x)$). So

the proposition expressed by [*n* is *F*] is dependent upon the speaker, demonstrated mental dossier, and world of context.²²⁷

This comes very close to the version of Descriptivism that I think is correct. According to it, for every utterance of the sentence “*n* is *F*,” there is some descriptive material that the subject associates at the context of utterance with the referent of the name. This descriptive material includes an index for the world of utterance. Indexical Descriptivism may be a better term for the idea that the descriptions giving the meaning of the name are indexed to the world of the utterance. As I will argue in the next chapter, treating definite descriptions as two-dimensional terms explains why, for each use of a definite description, the denotation of the description is the individual that satisfies at the context of utterance the properties mentioned in the description. It also explains why we tend to think that disparate uses at different contexts of the same description are similar, even though the objects denoted are different, and, thus, the propositions expressed by the two uses are different as well.

However, I disagree with Nelson’s proposal on a few counts and I would like to explain in what follows why a Descriptivist should think it is important to address these worries. The first problem raised by Nelson’s analysis is that the mere fact that an utterance of “*n* is *F*” takes place in a different world guarantees that the proposition expressed is different from that expressed by a similar use at our world. Including a world-index in the proposition expressed ensures that the utterance comprises a rigid designator. The less desirable consequence is that any change in the domain of individuals extant at a given world leads to a wholly different thought and this is something that may seem counterintuitive.

Consider again the counterpart of English that we spoke of in the previous chapter. Alt-English is a language syntactically identical to English that is used by inhabitants of world *w*₁. All assignments of individuals to names, properties to predicates, and so on are

²²⁷ Nelson, “Descriptivism Defended,” 418.

identical to those characterizing English. Suppose moreover that the history of w_I is completely identical to that of our world with the exception of one minute difference which does not have any impact on life on Earth. Imagine that, as it actually happens, Henry associates in w_I with the name “Aristotle” the description “the teacher of Alexander the Great.” Nelson’s proposal implies that Henry entertains a different thought in w_I than in our world when thinking that Aristotle was a subtle metaphysician. The two thoughts exploit mental dossiers that are identical as to whom they are of and to the properties they list. Yet since the world indices differ, Nelson must hold that this leads to a difference in the thought grasped.

This result serves to showcase in a more dramatic fashion one deeply unintuitive consequence of Descriptivism. Since the meaning of a name is given by the description or the cluster of descriptions associated with the name, the slightest change in the descriptive material that supports the use of the name must amount to a change in the meaning of the name. The above case is merely an application of this idea to Rigidified Descriptivism, where the semantic change is triggered by a variation of the world index, a change which is opaque to the subject who grasps the thought (“from the inside,” Henry does not think anything differently of Aristotle than what he actually does).

The counterpart of this problem at the level of belief ascriptions is that, if Henry and Paul inhabit different worlds, they cannot share the same singular belief. According to Nelson’s first rendition of the logical form of a belief ascription that n is F , the complement clause in the belief report determines only a class of propositions, whose descriptive material is assumed to be satisfied only by n . There is not one thing that one can believe when one thinks that n is F , but countless propositions, each characteristic of the context where the belief is entertained. Similarly, Nelson’s second account of belief ascriptions that utilizes correlation functions assumes that belief identity cannot be based on content identity, but

rather on content correlation. If Henry and Paul think that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician at different worlds, the objects of their beliefs are different as well. This seems to me completely unlikely. There is no reasonable conversational setting that could produce an account of Henry and Paul believing different things. They only believe one thing - that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician. A version of Descriptivism that entails that the content of their beliefs may be different seems to me as unlikely as one which entails that Henry and Paul do not mean the same thing when using the name “Kripke,” because the ways in which they were individually acquainted with the famous philosopher were different.

I think that Nelson is right to reply to Soames’ criticism that attributing to Henry at w_1 the belief that n is F only entails attributing to Henry belief in a proposition that is specific to the world where he entertains this thought. What I deny is that this proposition, which contains the world-index w_1 , is different from the one that Henry expresses here by a use of “ n is F ” and which contains the world-index of our world. The two propositions are not different. They are the same. They are the proposition that n is F .

5.6 NON-MODAL PROPOSITIONALISM

The modal argument assumes, among others, that we can infer a difference in content from a difference in the modal profile. The sentences “Aristotle is wise” and “The teacher of Alexander the Great is wise” do not express the same proposition because there is at least a possible world where the first sentence is true, while the second is false. If we deny this assumption, we can hold that two sentences may have the same content and exhibit divergent behavior when embedded in the scope of a modal operator.

The idea that the very notion of content is a mixed bag was wholeheartedly endorsed by Dummett who distinguished between the assertoric content and the ingredient sense of a

sentence.²²⁸ The assertoric content is at work when somebody who understands the utterance of a sentence is able to identify those states of affairs that make the assertion correct. To use an example due to Gareth Evans, suppose that we introduce the name “Julius” to refer to whoever invented the zip. Then the assertoric contents of the following utterances at our world will be identical:

Julius is famous.

The inventor of the zip is famous.

The reason is that one’s mastery of the use of the name “Julius” relies on the above convention. One who asserts the former sentence understands the same thing as one who asserts the latter sentence, that is, understanding the condition that makes “Julius is famous” true is just understanding (the condition) that the (actual) inventor of the zip is famous.

The ingredient sense of a sentence, on the other hand, is reflected in the contribution made by the sentence to larger, more complex sentences where it is embedded. “Ingredient sense is what semantic theories are concerned to explain.”²²⁹ It is a functional notion, whose application is driven by concerns to preserve the principle of compositionality. One who knows what states of affairs would make an assertion correct does not, thereby, have to understand also how the semantic value of the assertion is affected when embedded in larger propositional contexts. The assertoric content and the ingredient sense do not have to be identical.

Consider an application of Kripke’s modal argument to the name “Julius.” It is true that Julius might not have invented the zip, that is, there is a possible world where the individual who actually invented the zip is not the inventor of the zip. Kripke would infer that

²²⁸ Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, 47-49.

²²⁹ Ibid., 48.

the propositions expressed by “Julius invented the zip” and “The inventor of the zip invented the zip” are different. Dummett disagrees:

The word “proposition” is treacherous. What the two unmodalised sentences share is a common assertoric content; if Kripke is right about the modalised sentence with “might have”, the unmodalised ones differ in ingredient sense, being (logically) subsentences of the modalised ones. The difference between them lies *solely* in their different contributions to the sentences formed from them by modalisation and negation; in a language without modal operators or auxiliaries, no difference could be perceived.²³⁰

The two sentences share the assertoric content and have different ingredient senses. Pursuing this idea, Evans would distinguish between the proposition expressed by an utterance, which is the function that assigns to the utterance truth-values at different possible worlds, and the content of an utterance, which can be minimally defined as content shared by epistemically equivalent utterances, i.e., utterances such that, if one understands and believes one of them, one understands and believes the rest.²³¹ Sentences of the form “Julius is *F*” and “The inventor of the zip is *F*” are epistemically equivalent, but express different propositions (they embed differently under modal operators).²³²

To give another example at the level of properties, the property of being as tall as John is different from the property of being as tall as oneself, yet it does not follow that a sentence attributing the former to an object must have a different content from a sentence attributing the latter property to the same object. In the case of John, both sentences have the same content, namely, that John is as tall of John (himself). Evans uses the distinction between content and proposition to solve the puzzle of the *a priori* contingent. Merely by introducing the name “Julius” one is in a position to know that the sentence “Julius is the

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Evans, “Reference and Contingency,” 200-201.

²³² See also Davies and Humberstone, “Two Notions of Necessity” and their distinction between two operators in two-dimensional logic. Evans in “Comment on ‘Two Notions of Necessity’” argues that the fixedly operator is context-shifting and that this leads to difficulties. See Martin Davies “Reference and Contingency” for a reply.

inventor of the zip” is *a priori*. However, because modality is applied to propositions, the sentence “Julius is the inventor of the zip” is assessed as contingent because the person who actually invented the zip might have failed to do so at another world. “*A priori*” and “contingent” apply to different semantic dimensions. Distinguishing between them dissolves the puzzle.

Stanley places himself within this tradition when he distinguishes between a notion of “functional”, i.e., compositional, content that belongs to the formal semantic theory and a notion of what is said which is exploited by the theory of communication.²³³ The Expression-Communication Principle is an illustration of his conviction that any successful analysis of the notion of what is said must abide by the constraint that speakers say the same thing by uttering distinct sentences iff, given any context, uttering the sentences communicates the same thing.²³⁴ Since “Julius is *F*” and “The inventor of the zip is *F*” communicate the same piece of information, they also say the same thing. However, because they embed differently under modal operators, the Expression-Communication Principle entails that what is said is different from what is modally evaluated. It grounds non-modal propositionalism, i.e., the view that what is said by an utterance is different from the modal content of that utterance.

All proposals explored above share the idea that modal operators affect only one dimension of the meaning of a phrase. If some version of Descriptivism can be extracted from these remarks, it is a limited theory that already gave up on the modal discourse and tries to assert its usefulness by banishing modal constructions from the scope of its inquiry. This is, in itself, a reason to look for a more ambitious type of Descriptivism.

There is, however, another reason for doubting the coherence of demarcating modal from non-modal discourse. In his criticism of Stanley’s theory, Everett attempts to tackle

²³³ Stanley, “Modality and What is Said,” 322-323. Aside from these two notions, Stanley identifies a third kind of content which is at work in the study of propositional attitude ascriptions.

²³⁴ Ibid., 329.

head-on the claim that assertoric content is not subject to modal evaluation.²³⁵ I want to pursue the opposite strategy of asking what happens if this claim were true. Commenting on the function of modal operators in our language, Stanley states that

The meanings of the expressions in the language together form a background of common knowledge that is a crucial crutch in successful communication between competent speakers.... However, the function of modal evaluation is to allow us to consider alternative possibilities, ones in which background assumptions determined by the meanings of our terms do not hold.... It is for this reason that the modal content of a term is not affected by its meaning.²³⁶

Yet it is unclear if the modal content of a term is not determined partly by the meaning of the term. Stanley tends to characterize modal content as the object of formal semantics, where computational concerns reign supreme. This creates an image where abstract rules mechanically churn out new values from previously given ones. However, it is rather plain that these rules are instituted in order to preserve the meaning of what we say in modal contexts. Without a constraint from what we understand when we engage in modal discourse, formal semantics would be useless symbolism.

To put the same point in different terms, Stanley would have one believe that nothing is *communicated* by one's assertion of "It is possible that Julius is not the inventor of the zip." Yet it is obvious that we do understand and communicate and say something by such an utterance. When Stanley states that the function of modal operators is to suspend background assumptions, this makes it look as if an utterance such as the above takes place in a sort of communicational void. This seems to me incorrect.

From the first-person point of view, this consequence lacks plausibility. The subject who speaks without recourse to modal operators about Julius is not under the impression that he changed the type of discourse when he engages in counterfactual reasoning. Moreover, I

²³⁵ Everett, "Recent Defenses of Descriptivism," 130-133.

²³⁶ Stanley, "Modality and What is Said," 337.

believe it is correct to hold that our notion of an individual substance is not only temporally and spatially connoted. That is, it is not only true that we operate on the basis of a category that allows for identity in space and time. I hold that our notion of substance is also modally connoted: we also *understand* what it is for something to be the same individual through different possible worlds. By purging all modally-connoted phrases from the purview of the analysis of what is said, Stanley removes that conceptual category which buttresses the class of singular propositions. Descriptivism should not be defended by running away from singular propositions. It should be so phrased as to show that one can entertain singular thoughts, while drawing on descriptive material.

CHAPTER 6 – NAMES AND DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

6.1 REVIEW

Let us take stock of the main conclusions. We saw in the first chapter that Frege's puzzle can be used to buttress the idea that one's thoughts of an object are sensitive to the conceptual repertoire of the subject who entertains them. A proper analysis of singular thoughts must take into account the concepts that the subject employs to latch onto the putative object. I also said that a concept-based account of singular thoughts can explain their intentionality, provided that we enrich it with an explanation of concepts as unsaturated entities. Pace Russell, singular thoughts do not include their objects. I mentioned that there is significant uneasiness about this idea, manifested in the comment that such an account makes singular thoughts be about their objects only indirectly, insofar as the concepts employed in entertaining the thought single out a particular individual. This, I argued, is a mistake. The correct picture is that of a subject undertaking various actions by relying on various tools, not of a subject contemplating "internally" abstract entities that happen to be true of a specific object.

The philosophical instinct to analyze thinking in terms of seeing and its counterpart bias to account for concepts as objects of direct rational scrutiny leads to a predisposition to view thinking as being essentially a form of Platonic contemplation of concepts. Just as we think of ordinary objects as direct objects of perception, so too we should conceive of concepts as a different sort of objects, more abstract, which can be perceived by the mind's eye. I think there can be arguments mounted for the view that this is exactly how Frege understood thinking, but I do not wish to transform this section into a largely exegetical exercise. It is my contention, nonetheless, that, even if it is true, we can separate this thesis from the larger philosophical framework where it is embedded and which explains

intentionality in terms of using unsaturated entities. Once we accomplish this, we can reject the view that a conceptualist account of singular thoughts is bound to account for intentionality as a mere vicarious exercise, a by-product that ensues from grasping pure concepts. My thought that Henry reads philosophy is about Henry because the very tools that I am relying on in this activity “pull” me towards Henry, so to speak, point me in the direction of the individual of whom they are true. Concepts are, therefore, entities which by their very nature point towards an “outside”, a world.

In this respect, the formal sign of an object, which is the variable, means exactly what it says: a gap, an absence, a missing individual that would saturate the concept. When entertaining the thought schematically represented as “[the x : Fx] Gx ,” the mind employs only the concepts F and G . The presence of the sign x is mere symbolism, a convention which should not lead us astray. It can also be represented in this simple case by leaving it out altogether and writing “[the : F] G ”, where the empty spaces serve to underscore the unsaturated character of the concepts used in entertaining this thought.

I also said that Frege was unclear about how we should represent the sense of a proper name. According to May’s interpretation, Frege was positively committed to inferring a difference in names from a difference in senses associated with them. If this idea is wedded to a standard Descriptivist analysis of thoughts expressed while using proper names, then we should accept that, had he been presented with the case of two subjects entertaining distinct qualitative information about Aristotle, Frege would have concluded that they use different names, which only happen to be syntactically identical and co-referential. I think that this too is a mistake.

Yet surely, one could reply, if I associate “Aristotle” with the description “the teacher of Alexander the Great” and you associate the same (syntactically defined) name with, among others, the description “the philosopher that my teacher spoke about in the Tuesday class,”

then we cannot both think exactly the same thought when saying “Aristotle was a very subtle metaphysician.” We cannot do so because a thorough account of our singular thoughts would list their components and, given that the identifying concepts that we employ to discriminate Aristotle from other individuals do not match, the thoughts they are built up from must be different.

But how marked the contrast is between this habitual inference and the ordinary activities of teaching one how to use a name! Consider a case of teaching two subjects the use of the name “Henry.” Suppose I introduce Henry to Paul and Richard, pointing to him and uttering his name. It is plain that Paul and Richard may not have access to the same type of qualitative information. One might only think of cases where Paul does not wear his glasses and his vision is blurred or where Richard is color-blind or, finally, where the parts of Henry’s face to which Paul and Richard, respectively, have access are qualitatively different (say, Henry bears a birthmark on his right cheek that only Paul can see). In all these circumstances, the teaching of the name is not grounded in an identity of qualitative information shared by Paul and Richard, let alone the subject who was himself taught at one time to use the name. But does it follow that Paul and Richard entertain different thoughts? Or should we embrace the opposite view, giving up a conceptualist account of singular thoughts and allowing objects to be propositional constituents?

I am inclined to say the following: whatever a name is, its use convention is so framed as to treat the two thoughts which are made up of distinct concepts as being the same. “What do you mean by ‘Henry reads philosophy’?” “Well, I speak about the person I met that day who had the birthmark on his face” *or* “The person that was sitting in the shade next to Paul” *or* “I mean the man who came by when we stopped at the fountain,” and so on. All these restatements are not renditions of different thoughts. Under the conventions regulating the use of a name, they all mean the same thing, i.e., that Henry reads philosophy.

It should be clear that this sort of reasoning could not be more alien to Russell's philosophy. Given his commitment to the compositionality principle and his Theory of Descriptions, Russell could not treat the above variations as expressions of the same thought. Moreover, the austere condition he placed on being a logically proper name ensures that no description can be a singular term. Unlike sense data, which are the referents of genuine proper names, concepts or universals are accessible to other minds. If communication that is normally carried out by the use of ordinary proper names is in fact reducible to communication based on speaking about universals, then we have an explanation of how the public activity of using such names is possible at all. Concepts are inter-subjectively accessible. Sense data are not. Logically proper names cannot be communicated because their use is bound to a category of entities which are defined to be accessible only to the subject. Ordinary proper names - and definite descriptions - can be employed in communication because the entities they stand for are accessible to any subject. They are not dependent on this or that object for their existence. They are "repeatable" entities, which can survive the destruction of their "support," of what props them into existence, of what "stands behind" their manifestation, i.e., of substances.

The idea that the concepts supposedly used in referring to an object with an ordinary proper name stand for "repeatable" entities lies at the heart of Kripke's modal argument, because repeatability entails the notion that a distinct substance might have exemplified the universals mentioned in the singular thought. Yet names do not appear to have variable reference. On the one hand, the fact that names are rigid designators underscores a potentially fatal flaw in the project of reducing names to descriptions. On the other hand, the semantic and the epistemological arguments hang on the idea that the information associated with an individual may turn out to be incorrect, without making one question what the name refers to. I said that a version of Cluster Descriptivism can counter the two arguments by holding that

the description “the individual referred to by other members of my linguistic community via this name” is allowed in the cluster. Kripke is right to say that such descriptions should not be circular and it is worth pointing out that they are not usually so. When they do turn out to be circular, as in the case of two subjects, each incorrectly assuming that the other has individuating information about the referent of the name *n*, then it is minimally sensible to say that the two subjects did not use the same name. In general, because we learn names from other members of the community, we also tend to rely on them in cases of epistemic emergency. The additional point that names should also enable communication makes us willing to adjust our use of a name to fit the public use.

When this concord is upset by more unusual cases, subjects can be at a loss on agreeing what name, if any, was used. Descriptivism can account for the existence of this grey area of our linguistic practices, by holding that, in such cases, the cluster of information deployed by the subject can be reasonably extended in the direction of more than one name – or none. We should always strive to be as clear as possible, but we should not allow ourselves to be led into thinking that there is only one given answer to any question about our linguistic practices. At times, their correct description must make a shambles of them.

In contrast, the modal argument cannot be so easily dismissed. Rigidity is an essential feature of names. I also said that it is a by-product at the linguistic level of the more fundamental category of substance, which stands for an irreducible type of continuous presence in space, time, and across worlds. Identity through space and time is a known feature of the transcendental category of substance. Identity through possible worlds is another characteristic whose importance was brought to our attention by Kripke’s work in modal logic.

One obvious way to counter the modal argument and vindicate Descriptivism is to account for this latter type of identity by placing a syntactic demand on the logical form of all

thoughts expressed by using a proper name. This requirement is to give the description(s) associated with the name widest scope relative to all modal operators, ensuring thereby that the variable ranges over the domain of the actual world. We saw that this approach runs into problems when explaining the apparent meaningfulness of negative existential sentences embedded in the scope of a modal operator, which contain an occurrence of an empty name. An utterance of “Possibly, Santa Claus does not exist” cannot be rendered as “The jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole and brings gifts on Christmas to good children is such that at some possible world he does not exist” because the rendition is false, while what was originally said is intuitively true. Moreover, Widescopism implies that, in a world where its inhabitants speak a language identical from all relevant viewpoints to English, an utterance of “Possibly, Aristotle is wise” cannot mean the same thing as an utterance of the homophonically identical sentence in English because the variables that lie outside the modal operators in the formalization of both utterances range over distinct domains.

Another way to block the modal argument is to deploy Rigidified Descriptivism and add the particle “actual” to every description in the cluster associated with the name. But then again the most inconsequential differences between two worlds should lead, according to this account, to a difference in what is conveyed. However, it is not clear why in a world that differs from ours in petty ways an utterance of “Aristotle is wise” must express a different thought than the one expressed by an actual utterance of the same words. Moving on to belief states Rigidified Descriptivism would entail that two subjects placed in different worlds cannot entertain the same object of belief when they utter “Aristotle is wise.” This, again, seems to me too strong a conclusion. The only remaining option was a form of Rigidified Descriptivism that viewed the definite descriptions belonging to the cluster which gives meaning to a use of a name as that-terms, obstinately rigid terms which are not directly referential. I said that one way to depict the account of Descriptivism I favor is to say that I

hold that all descriptions on the subject position are two-dimensional terms. Let us explore this idea in what follows.

6.2 DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS AS TWO-DIMENSIONAL TERMS

I should begin with a caveat. I am only speaking about singular definite descriptions. The current claim may be initially presented by saying that the difference between “the” and “this” is marginal. The latter, unlike the former, implies a type of spatial or discourse proximity. Definite descriptions exhibit character and content. I shall speak of the character of a definite description in the same way that Kaplan speaks of the character of indexicals, i.e., as a rule to use the description that may be viewed as stating its linguistic meaning.

The description “the teacher of Alexander the Great” is used so that it denotes, if at all, the person who at the world of utterance happened to be the tutor of Alexander the Great. The question is whether changing the world of utterance affects what is said. I believe that viewing definite descriptions as two-dimensional terms can explain the apparent divergent pull of the following intuitions. To revert to one of Everett’s examples that we discussed in the chapter on Widescopism, it is clear that one who utters the sentence “The teacher of Alexander the Great is wise” at the actual world and one who would utter it at a different world do not differ in terms of linguistic knowledge. Both subjects use the same words, according to the same rules. There is an undeniable similarity between the two utterances, which demands an explanation. At the same time, the intentional states of the two subjects are not identical. The former means to say something about whoever tutored Alexander the Great at the world of his utterance, while the latter manifestly has in mind the teacher of Alexander the Great at his own world.

This type of intentionality is sometimes presented as a pragmatic effect of using phrases which do not denote on their own. Kent Back, for example, is unambiguous about the

fact that the apparent referential function of a definite description can be inferred from more general norms concerning rational communication.²³⁷ The Gricean distinction between what is said and what is meant should prove the fact that, although one can only say a uniqueness proposition, one can certainly mean a distinct singular proposition, which contains, if anything, the denotation of the definite description.

The idea, dear to all who tend to be frugal about the ontology of semantic theories, is that, instead of postulating two semantic dimensions in the present case, we should endorse only the classic Russellian analysis and allow for more information than meets the eye. Yet this type of analysis is limited by its very nature to situations involving an informational exchange between two subjects or more. It has absolutely nothing at all to say about cases that involve only one subject.

As Bach himself acknowledges, if we want to convey information about an object to one who is not privy of its name, we are very likely to use a definite description. If you did not hear Henry's name last night when I introduced him to you, I can inform you about Henry's health by saying "The friend we both met last night at the restaurant just caught a cold." What Bach does not mention is that thinking proceeds also based on the use of tokening the information conveyed by definite descriptions. The conceptual intake that is available from our interaction with the world has the form "The *F* is *G*." The description is used as denoting the unique *F* at the world where the subject is currently entertaining the thought. This sort of examples sit badly with Bach's analysis, because there is no communication involved, thus no possibility to infer a further thought conveyed.

Let us take a look at how Neale explains the pragmatic inference.²³⁸ Suppose that communication abides by the Cooperative Principle and the following maxims:

²³⁷ Bach, "Descriptions: Points of Reference," 203.

²³⁸ Neale, *Descriptions*, 89.

The Cooperative Principle: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

Maxim of Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true. In particular, do not say what you believe to be false and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous. In particular, avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity, and be brief and orderly.²³⁹

Then one who utters “The F is G ” can be taken to communicate that a is G , where a is the denotation of the description “the F ,” provided that

1. Both the speaker and the subject he is addressing know that a is the only G . Each of them is aware that the other knows that he knows that a is the only G . Knowledge that a is the only G , that each party in the conversation knows it, and that each party knows that the other knows that he knows it informs the communicational exchange.
2. There is no reason to suppose that the subject is not observing the Cooperative Principle and its maxims.
3. S observes the Maxim of Relation, thus S attempts to express more than the uniqueness proposition assigned by the Theory of Descriptions.
4. S adheres to the Maxim of Quality and has adequate grounds for expressing a singular proposition which involves a specific object.²⁴⁰

Let me point out, first, that this kind of inference thrives when applied to cases where we both know who the F is or I can detect the F in the environment where the utterance is

²³⁹ Grice, “Logic and Conversation,” 26-27.

²⁴⁰ Following Evans (*The Varieties of Reference*), Neale distinguishes between two referential uses of a definite description, one in which the description is meant to function like a name and one in which its function is closer to a complex demonstrative. I ignore the distinction in what follows.

taking place. The inference falters in situations where this is not so easily doable. To modify Donnellan's original example featuring the man drinking a martini, suppose that neither the subject, nor I can detect whom he speaks about. We have a completely unreliable palate that would not tell the difference between martini and mere water and both forgot our glasses home which makes us almost as blind as a bat. All conditions that support the application of the above inference do not obtain. There is nobody that we can reasonably take to satisfy the description "the *F*," yet this does not prevent me from comprehending the sentence as transmitting a singular thought. Second, it is unlikely that this model can be applied to a case where the subject is simply thinking about the people he meets at the party, by using descriptions true of them. The demonstrative forms "that *F*" and "this *F*" are more suitable when the denotation can be located spatially around the subject. The switch to "the *F*" when spatial clues are unavailable or should be ignored is further indication that definite descriptions function like demonstratives. Defining definite descriptions as two-dimensional terms is my interpretation of the notion of *de re* senses. Accounting for definite descriptions in a two-dimensional framework removes the mystery of what senses of objects are. They are identified with the senses of tokened definite descriptions.

Finally, since definite descriptions function like demonstratives, a tokened definite description is a rigid designator. The modal argument does not obtain, not because definite descriptions always take wide scope or because they can be enriched with rigidified particles, but because assessing the same form of words at a different world opens the possibility that its content is changed, in the same way in which assessing the same (type) demonstrative in a different context opens the possibility that different information is conveyed.

6.3 THE SAME NAME

Names are introduced only because of practicality. The fundamental form of a singular thought is “The *F* is *G*,” not “*a* is *F*.” In keeping track of an object, we organize various descriptions that we take to be true of the same object in clusters whose adequacy we continuously revisit and whose content we often enrich. Some of the descriptions taken to be satisfied by one given object may turn out to be true of another individual or none. When this happens, we fall back on the rest of the cluster to give content to our thoughts about the original object. We do so, because we try to eliminate error or because we try to unify our linguistic practices with those of the rest of our community.

Nonetheless, these are epistemic or pragmatic considerations. Because the fundamental form of a singular thought is “The *F* is *G*,” it is, strictly speaking, irrelevant whether there is a unique *F* or not. The thought itself remains singular under the said conditions: that the unique *F* at the relevant context of thought is *G*. Our ability to entertain thoughts about non-existent entities, like Pegasus or Sherlock Holmes, derives from this fundamental ability to deploy the category of substance at will.

I view definite descriptions in the same way in which Kaplan views *dthat*-terms, with the proviso that they can never fail to be meaningful. Utterances comprising definite descriptions are intelligible because the conditions placed on being the object of thought are intelligible themselves. We have the ability to grasp what it means to be the unique *F* at the actual world. We, thus, have the ability to entertain a thought about the (only) *F*, whether or not there is such an object.

The position I am hereby advocating is a variety of Cartesianism with regard to singular thoughts or better said with regard to their form. Whether something is a singular thought depends only on its “internal” properties, the way the composing concepts are organized. This “architectural” feature is directly accessible to the subject. One can never fail

to have a singular thought, if one so wishes, although it is clear that one is not thereby guaranteed to have a thought about a real existent. Cartesianism about singular thoughts explains our ability to continue thinking about an object, even at dire epistemic times, for instance, when we discover that most of what we thought of an object is false, or is true of various other individuals. We can do so, because each member of the cluster of descriptions is like a seed in itself for a new cluster.

Cluster Descriptivism, therefore, appears to me to be the natural way of explaining not only how we give meaning to names, but also, more generally, how we organize knowledge about individuals. It is a thesis that should be cherished both for its semantic and epistemic virtues and it can serve as evidence that semantics and epistemology can never be neatly separated. Yet I am inclined to think that Cluster Descriptivism has to be supplemented with a contextualist thesis. Suppose I discover that certain information that I initially considered to be true of a given object n boils down to distinct descriptions of sundry other objects. Am I to simply discard it and go along with the public use of the name or retain it and use n henceforth as the name of that (nonexistent) object that allegedly satisfied the entire cluster? Or, if roughly equal regions of a given cluster turn out to be true of distinct objects, which region should I view as providing the meaning conditions for the name n ? More importantly, what if, in such a case, the discovery pertains to what everybody took to be the correct conception of n , i.e., what if there is no public use of n that I can fall back on?

I do not see how a principled answer to such questions can be given. I do not think there is anything systematic about these scenarios because adjusting a convention may have to do with power, influence, fads, or just laziness. This implies that adjusting the weights and moving ahead with portions of a cluster looks like case law. A multitude of semantic precedents may dictate the decision in the current case, but it may also fail to do this. If I choose the path of least resistance, I can just follow whatever seems to be the emerging

public use. But if I am stubborn and assured enough that I can shape the public use, I can very well try to impose my own choice. One would not be able to say here: “You just invented a new name and wanted to pass it along as the old one.” If I am successful, then the public use will disprove the remark (I made the meaning of the name be what I had wanted).

I said that a name is significant inasmuch as its use is associated with a certain cluster of descriptions. The whole idea behind interpreting definite descriptions as two-dimensional terms is that a tokened definite description contains a used variable, i.e., a variable which is assessed only at a specific domain or, to put it differently, that entertaining the content expressed by a definite description implies an instantiation of the category of substance. Keeping track of an object is, at a linguistic level, keeping track of a used variable. Using a name is indicating that any member of the cluster can be an acceptable substitution in regard to the information conveyed.

The cluster has a history that explains its identity. An individual is an irreducible continuity in space, time, and across worlds. A cluster or mental file is an abstract entity that has its own historical stages, just as the substance that it is meant to track. If I initiate two clusters containing information that turns out to be true of the same object, they still count as distinct clusters inasmuch as I was ready to treat them so. We discovered that “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” are indeed co-referential, yet they will never be the same name. The historical processes that explain their identity over time are distinct.

If we view a cluster as an entity with its own history, then the fundamental drive which guides Metalinguistic or Causal Descriptivism and which is to isolate the semantic value possessed at all times by the name is revealed as misguided. The same drive can be noticed in the proposal put forth within the direct reference framework, to identify this value with the name’s bearer. While the above types of Descriptivism and the direct reference theory disagree with respect to the correct specification of the semantic value of a name, they

share the conviction that a name has only one semantic value, which remains constant and can be uncovered by philosophical inquiry.

According to Cluster Descriptivism, each token of a name is associated with a cluster of descriptions. Yet there is no requirement that the cluster itself or some portion of it remain constant throughout the life of the subject. The transition from each stage of the cluster to the next one explains the identity of the cluster throughout time. One consequence of looking at names as collections of tokens held together by the evolution of mental files or clusters of information associated with the bearer of the name is that Frege's puzzle cannot receive a general yes or no answer. Does one believe that Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus? That depends on what tokens of the two names we have in mind when asking the question.

To exemplify the sort of attitude I argue against, consider the following argument: if definite descriptions are genuine referential terms, then it should be contradictory to say, for example, that Aristotle was not the tutor of Alexander the Great. I said that definite descriptions are two-dimensional terms, so we should read "the tutor of Alexander the Great" as meaning the actual tutor of Alexander III of Macedon. However, the question still remains whether it is correct to say that an utterance of the above sentence is contradictory.

The key word is "utterance." Right now, the cluster that I associate with Aristotle contains the piece of information that he was the tutor of Alexander the Great. That is, right now, it is contradictory for me to say that Aristotle is not identical with the tutor of Alexander the Great, but it may well be the case that, years ago, it was not incoherent to deny it, because, at that time, the tokens of the name "Aristotle" I used were associated with clusters which did not contain this piece of information.

Can two (type) names ever be semantically identical? Metalinguistic Descriptivism denies this possibility and there may be an inclination to think that simply calling an object in a different way amounts to a distinct name. But consider a case when I explicitly introduce

two names for the same object. Let us suppose that it is part of the naming convention that they can always be swapped without any loss in the information conveyed. We can imagine that in our linguistic community there are people who encounter great difficulties in pronouncing the first ten letters of the alphabet and I wish to accommodate this by making sure that the second name contains no such letters. There is, then, an obvious implication in using the second name: either I cannot pronounce the first ten letters of the alphabet or I want others to believe so or I think that the person I am talking to cannot pronounce them. Yet, if we leave aside these considerations, is there any semantic difference in using one name rather than the other? I am inclined to give a negative answer to this question.

One may reply that this inclination is due to the fact that the naming convention is so framed as to explicitly deny the semantic significance of the property of bearing a certain name. I must say that it would still seem rather peculiar to me how we could achieve such a feat, given that, according to Metalinguistic Descriptivism, a name must be construed as expressing such a property. But let us grant this to the objector and suppose that it is somehow achievable. Imagine then that two different subjects introduce two distinct names, *a* and *b*, for the same object, let us say, by writing them down in their notebooks. We can also imagine that the properties of the object they are exposed to are the same. They both witness a red, square-looking coffee cup sitting on the desk (assume that all other environmental conditions, such as lighting, remain unchanged). I should think that, if they are informed of all these, after having uttered “*a* is red” and “*b* is red” the two subjects would answer “So we were saying the same thing.” The objector can insist, however, that since they assumed that that they are speaking about different objects, each subject updated the relevant cluster with information to the effect that the object he speaks about is not identical to the one the other subject was referring to.

Yet this is not enough, by itself, to guarantee distinctness. I can assume that you are using the name “Henry” to refer to another Henry than the one I am acquainted with and later discover that I was wrong and that you were speaking in fact of my friend who reads philosophy. Simply adding to the cluster a piece of information to the effect that Henry is not the person you are speaking about will not guarantee that the two tokens are different. The reason why this information will not be automatically granted too much weight against other descriptions is that the information it conveys is only an invitation to talk to you and find out more about the person you referred to by saying “Henry.”

To wit, what is transparent to the subject is whether two tokens he uses are the same or not. It is not similarly apparent to him whether a name token he just used is identical with that uttered by somebody else. So when you lead me to Henry and say “I’m talking about him,” even if I believe that you wish to deceive me and present me with a lookalike, I am wrong and we are using the same name.

We can assess now how the current version of Descriptivism compares with the other extant proposals. We saw that Widescopism cannot explain how utterances of sentences such as “It is possible that Santa Claus does not exist” are true. The problem stems from the fact that, if we assign to the descriptive content associated with the empty name wide scope relative to the modal operator, the entire proposition expressed is false. However, if we treat the definite description expressing the sense of the name as a singular term, then we can say that, since there is no actual jolly fat man living at the North Pole who brings gifts to good children on Christmas, no object in the domain of some world can be identical to him. That is, the utterance says that

There is a world w such that there is no object x in the domain of w which is identical to the F .

where the description gives the meaning of the name and the fact that it is underlined indicates that the description is not to be assessed at the domain of w , but at the domain of the world of the utterance.

Rigidified Descriptivism had to deal with the problem of explaining how singular belief reports embed in the context of modal operators. If the sense of the name “Aristotle” is given by the description “the actual teacher of Alexander the Great,” then, in asserting that it is possible that Henry believes that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician, we are in fact asserting that, at some possible world, Henry has a belief about a certain individual in our world. The solution proposed by Nelson was to relativize propositional content to the context of utterance and then to suggest either that the *that*-clauses designate classes of such propositions or that certain correlations obtain between the annotations assigned to the *that*-clauses of the belief reports that we want to regard as conveying the same belief.

I said that I want to treat as identical various world-relative propositions. Let me explain what I meant by this. The practice of using a name is based on the identification of various descriptive contents which differ in regard to their conceptual constituents. This allows us the degree of flexibility necessary for dealing with an individual that undergoes change and also unifies the conceptual intake that various subjects possess as a result of encounters with the same individual at distinct moments or distinct places. Yet the identity of the individual through change may also be recast as identity across possible worlds. One fundamental insight regarding the category of substance is that, had certain circumstances occurred, the individual would have stayed the same. Transworld identity is but a facet of the kind of identity which also manifests itself as identity in space-time.

Space-time identity is based on an objective fact of the matter, namely, that the descriptions “the F at time t_1 /place p_1 ” and “the G at time t_2 /place p_2 ” denote the same object. Yet transworld identity is not a matter of seeing whether the F in this world is the same as the

G in that world. As Kripke stresses it, it involves positing that the identity takes place.²⁴¹ Given that we wish to describe a possible world, we have to list minimally the changes that set it apart from the actual world (an individual-by-individual and property-by-property description is possible only when the domain and the properties instantiated at the world are limited in number). Suppose we say “In w_1 , Aristotle was born in Rome at the same time when he was actually born.” Then we stipulate that the following identity occurs:

The actual teacher of Alexander the Great = The individual who, in w_1 , was born in Rome at exactly the same time when the actual teacher of Alexander the Great was born.

It follows from this that, if, in w_1 , Henry has a belief about an individual by using a cluster containing the above description, then Henry has a singular belief about Aristotle. Propositional identity obtains because it is stipulated.

This strategy also blocks the other problem that Rigidified Descriptivism had to deal with, namely, that the most insignificant change in our world leads necessarily to a change in what was conveyed. Suppose that a remote star in a distant galaxy is not born, with absolutely no consequences regarding what is the case on our planet. As long as it is postulated that I think of the same person in this alternate world, I would be entertaining the same thought as the one I actually verbalize by uttering “Aristotle was a subtle metaphysician.”

It also explains how we can identify content across languages. We saw in the chapter where we discussed Widescopism that defenders of this view encounter difficulties in agreeing that an utterance of “Possibly, Aristotle is wise,” made in a different world by a subject who uses a language that is to all purposes identical to English, has the same content as a similar

²⁴¹ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 46.

utterance made in English. Yet because we define this possible world as one in which certain facts about Aristotle obtain and are known by the subject who utters the sentence, we thereby postulate that his utterance says the same thing as an actual utterance of the same words.²⁴²

The careful reader must have noticed that I only spoke of reports of the form “At w , Henry believes that Aristotle is F .” I have not said anything about reports such as “Possibly/Necessarily, Henry believes that Aristotle is F .” It will later turn out that I do not believe that this kind of reports attribute in fact any singular belief to Henry. They do say that he has certain beliefs which, as a matter of fact, concern Aristotle, but they do not have the form “Possibly/Necessarily, Henry believes that the F is G .”

6.4 UNDERSTANDING AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENCY

A name is a placeholder for descriptions in the cluster that the subject relies on when thinking about the referent of the name. Using a name is engaging in a convention whereby the subject who utters it signals that any replacement of the name with a description belonging to the cluster is content-preserving. Communication between subjects abides by this convention. To use tokens of the same name is to be disposed to accept that the properties mentioned in one’s cluster can be encoded into the other’s mental file. The convention is essentially a rule about dynamic senses. Given that an individual is a potentially ever-changing substance, our conception of it has to be articulated in such a way that it keeps track of the individual over time, space, and across worlds. The sense of a name is given by the cluster which is adjusted to track the putative individual. Reflecting the nature of the name’s referent, the sense of the name is essentially dynamic. To say that two subjects use the same name is to say that they both partake to the same dynamic sense of the name’s referent. Concept-by-concept identity between their conceptions is not required. They can

²⁴² Assuming that the sets of worlds accessible from the actual world and from the alternative one are identical.

entertain the same sense in the same way in which they can be on the same street, without actually occupying the same exact place on the street.

Imagine two subjects watching from opposite directions a red cup sitting on a desk. Their conceptual intake varies, if one is mindful only of the concepts grasped. Yet when the subjects introduce a name for the object, they grant it the same sense. To give a different example, suppose I look now at the keyboard sitting on my desk (call it “Joe”) and move away from it. The concept-by-concept description is altered as my position relative to the keyboard changes, yet the thought that Joe is on the desk remains the same. To share a dynamic sense is not tantamount to grasping exactly the same concepts. It is rather like playing tug of war - and two subjects never hold the same part of the rope. Or like heaving a cumbersome package - and those who lift it grab it from different corners.

While arguing that we can only know by description a proposition which involves an individual that we are not acquainted with, such as Bismarck, Russell stated that

What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that, however we may vary the description (so long the description is correct), the proposition described is still the same.²⁴³

My view is that we should take seriously this idea, but forego the additional thesis that, aside from the propositions expressed by varying such descriptions, there is another proposition involving Bismarck himself. There is no such proposition. That which is expressed by a sentence is purely conceptual.

The corollary that, if something has a purely conceptual nature, then its application is not bound to a specific context, is part of the philosophical tradition that sets concepts against individuals and describes the former in opposition with the latter as eternal, indestructible, impervious to changes occurring in the world of individuals, thus, by extension, impervious

²⁴³ Russell, “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Description,” 254.

to the identity of the world altogether. The postulated identity of the concept across space, time, and possible worlds ensures that, if one grasps a purely conceptual thought, then one is immune to the machinations of the Cartesian demon, for the demon can lure one into thinking that the thoughts one has are true, but he cannot deceive one regarding the composition itself of the thoughts entertained. Yet the price to pay for the fact that the conceptual realm is transparent to the mind is that a chasm opens between it and the world of individual substances. There may be, at the end of the day, a transcendental argument showing that there is an outer world, but its nature, composition, and laws remain shrouded in mystery.

One philosophical reaction to this view was to bridge the gap between the mind and the world by making the identity of some thoughts depend on the identity of their putative objects. However, because singular thoughts obtain independently of whatever the subject may think, the transparency of the mental must now be denied. One wanted to undo the Cartesian spell and reconnect the mind with the world. Before, the world was obscure. Now the mind itself becomes, at times, inscrutable. As I am advocating a version of Cartesianism, I hold that the contents of the mind are completely transparent. Thoughts are singular because of their structure (their logical form) and are composed exclusively of concepts. What I deny is that any exercise of our conceptual faculties must be context-independent.

Russell's analysis implies two positive semantic proposals. The first is that singular propositions involve only individuals from a specific class. The second is that definite descriptions are not singular terms and that they express a certain type of conceptual composites whose meaning remains stable as we vary the context of evaluation. "The teacher of Alexander the Great was wise" retains its meaning whether we utter it now, at a later time, or would have uttered it in a different world. Contemporary Russellians endorse the first proposal and define the above class to include ordinary physical objects, but they also

embrace the second proposal. I deny both theses: singular propositions involve only concepts, the exercise of which is context-dependent.

Let me try to better define the view that I wish to endorse by briefly looking at a competing proposal, as endorsed by David Kaplan, in “How to Russell a Frege-Church.” Kaplan notes there that, unlike Frege, Russell accepted that individuals can be immediate constituents of a proposition and suggests that this difference carries over in how the semantic theories inspired by the two philosophers handle the problem of trans-world identity.²⁴⁴ If one sides with Russell, then one endorses in effect a version of Haecceitism.

Here is Kaplan’s definition of Haecceitism:

The doctrine that holds that it does make sense to ask-without reference to common attributes and behavior—whether *this* is the same individual in another possible world, that individuals can be extended in logical space (i.e., through possible worlds) in much the way we commonly regard them as being extended in physical space and time, and that a common “thisness” may underlie extreme dissimilarity or distinct thisnesses may underlie great resemblance, I call *Haecceitism*.²⁴⁵

In contrast, if one sides with Frege, then one thereby backs Anti-Haecceitism, a doctrine denying that there is anything objective regarding the identity of an individual across possible worlds:

The opposite view, *Anti-Haecceitism*, holds that for entities of distinct possible worlds there is no notion of trans-world being. They may, of course, be linked by a common concept and distinguished by another concept—as Eisenhower and Nixon are linked across two moments of time by the concept *the president of the United States* and distinguished, at the same pair of moments, by the concept *the most respected member of his party*—but there are, in general, many concepts linking any such pair and many distinguishing them.... Our interests may cause us to *identify* individuals of distinct worlds, but we are then creating something—a trans-world continuant—of a kind different from anything given by the metaphysics.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Kaplan, “How to Russell a Frege-Church,” 718.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 722-723.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 723.

It seems to me that Kaplan treats as equivalent here the question of whether the transworld identity of an individual reflects a metaphysical reality with the question of whether the individual is thought of directly or by means of a concept. The Bundle Theory may lurk in the background already, because if an individual is just a combination of properties, there may be contexts in which we would like to identify the bundle *ABC* with *BCD* and others in which we would like to deny this.

More importantly, the contrast that Kaplan draws between Haecceitism and Anti-Haecceitism is not absolute. One could have expected to find that Anti-Haecceitism is the thesis that claims that it is *not* possible to ask, in the absences of individuating qualities, questions pertaining to transworld identity. Instead, one discovers that Anti-Haecceitism is the doctrine that there is no substantive, real question of whether two individuals at distinct worlds are identical or not. The operative assumption is that identifying two individuals-under-a-concept across possible worlds cannot express an objective fact.

But is this true? Let us take a look at Kaplan's own example. Replace possible worlds talk with a discourse about temporal slices. The individuals Eisenhower and Nixon both fall, at different moments, under the concept *being the U.S. President*, but the latter, unlike the former, does not fall under the concept *the most respected member of the Republican Party* (Kaplan wrote the article before Reagan became president and I shall assume, probably incorrectly, that Eisenhower is still the most respected Republican president). Is there anything objective about identifying the individual who falls under the first concept between January 20, 1953 and January 20, 1961 and the individual who falls under the second concept? Kaplan says there isn't. I disagree. There is an objective continuity that can be expressed by the identity

the U.S. President between January 20, 1953 and January 20, 1961 = the most respected member of the Republican Party

This idea can also be expressed, in possible world jargon, by saying, with reference to a world where Adlai Stevenson was a more successful candidate that

the actual U.S. President between January 20, 1953 and January 20, 1961 = the Republican candidate who lost in world w_1 the 1953 elections against Stevenson

Names are only one example of linguistic items the understanding of which is based on the exercise of context-dependent conceptual faculties. Incomplete descriptions are another. Given that definite descriptions are two-dimensional terms, their content is dependent on the context where the concepts expressed are applied. I said that using a name signals that any description the subject may put forth will do as long as it tracks the right object. An incomplete description resembles a name in this respect, since any completion of the description will do as long as the correct object is denoted.

If one says “The table is covered with books” and does not want to make a general statement, then one is engaging in a linguistic game in which he signals to his audience that any completion he or they may propose counts as expressing the same thought on the condition that the completion amounts to identifying the right object. We saw that, faced with the multitude of possible completions of an utterance such as the above, some philosophers argued that thought itself is vague or indeterminate or that there is nothing in particular expressed, but only a linguistic blueprint offered, which can be filled out in various ways. All these reactions are based on the supposition that, if two descriptive thoughts are composed of different concepts, then they must be different. The same reasoning can be also seen at work

in Wettstein's argument that, since there are possible completions that the subject who uttered the sentence would agree to, the thought expressed cannot be descriptive, so it must contain the individual itself which the incomplete description purports to denote.

Before closing with a review of arguments against the idea that descriptions can be referring expressions, I should mention that I am uncertain about how to handle similar examples of quantified phrases such as

- (1) No student read "On Denoting" (said of a particular group of students).
- (2) Some beers were cold (said of some bottles in a particular fridge).
- (3) Upon hearing the news, everybody was upset (said to describe the mood of a certain audience).

As Neale points out, any account of quantified phrases must clarify the way in which (1), for instance, can be true even if there are other students in this world who have not yet read "On Denoting." I think that a thorough analysis of such phrases as referring expression is possible. Something of this sort, I believe, was also entertained by Strawson who argued that, when they are uttered in a context where there are no trees, the following are meaningless:

All trees are blooming.

Some trees are blooming.

No trees are blooming.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory*, 170-195, especially where Strawson develops the suggestion of interpreting "all the four Aristotelian forms on these lines: that is, as forms such that the question of whether statements exemplifying them are true or false is one that does not arise unless the subject-class has members." (174)

I am inclined to think that Strawson was reasoning within the confines of the model offered by the direct reference approach to demonstratives: if nothing is demonstrated, nothing is said, although linguistic meaning may still be available. This assumption is, certainly, not mandatory. One can endorse a referential account of all quantified phrases of the form “*DF*”, where “*D*” stands for any determiner, while maintaining the traditional reading of the above sentences in cases where the subject-class is empty.

6.5 ARE DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS REFERRING EXPRESSIONS?

Given that treating definite descriptions as singular terms provides a natural explanation for a number of intuitions regarding their behavior, what accounts for the philosophical resistance to adopting this view? I shall wrap up this dissertation by reviewing a number of arguments that aim at illustrating the drawbacks of interpreting definite descriptions in this manner. Gareth Evans in *The Varieties of Reference* lists the main arguments that Russell had fielded against this view and I believe it is useful to begin by briefly taking a look at them.²⁴⁸ Before we do this, however, I should add a terminological note. Evans distinguishes between singular terms, defined à la Russell (no referent = no semantic value), and referring expressions, that is, those expressions whose contribution to what is said is stated exclusively via the reference relation, as implicitly defined by the following principle:

(P) If *S* is an atomic sentence in which the *n*-place relation *R* is combined with *n* singular terms *t*₁ . . . *t*_{*n*}, then *S* is true iff <the referent of *t*₁ . . . the referent of *t*_{*n*}> satisfies *R*.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 51-53.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 49.

According to Evans, both proper names and descriptive names are referring expressions, but only the former impose the condition that meaningful use requires the referent to exist. I do not believe that natural languages contain any Russellian singular terms. My use of “singular terms” is matched better by Evans’ notion of referring expressions.

The first argument mentioned by Russell is that, unbeknownst to a subject, it is possible for a description and a name to denote the same object. George IV knew that Scott is identical to Scott, but he did not know that Scott is also (identical to) the author of *Waverly*. The operative assumption is that referring expressions are such that, if one is acquainted with their referents, then one thereby knows which expressions are co-referential. Evans denies that such knowledge is a good criterion for identifying referential expressions and points out that if we allow them to have a sense, then we can also allow identity statements such as “Scott is identical to the author of *Waverly*” to be informative.

Russell’s second argument, as set forth by Evans, is as follows:

- (1) If “the *F*” is a referring expression, then the negation of “The *F* is *G*” is “The *F* is not *G*.”
- (2) By the law of the excluded middle, either “The *F* is *G*” is true or “The *F* is not *G*” is true.
- (3) In either case, “the *F*” must refer, that is, the *F* must exist.
- (4) But it is possible that “the *F*” does not denote anything.
- (5) Thus, “the *F*” is not a referring expression.

Evans criticizes the second argument on the account that (1) implicitly assumes that all referring expressions behave like logically proper names. If demonstratives for sense data were referring expressions, then the negation of “This is red” is “This is not red.” Yet “The *F*

is G ” is unlike “This is G ”, because it can be contradicted both by “The F is not G ” and by “There is no F .”

Lastly, the third argument that Evans detects in Russell’s writings is that if definite descriptions were indeed referring expressions, they would be meaningless, if they did not denote. As there are meaningful non-denoting definite descriptions, this would show that definite descriptions are not referring expressions. Again, Evans correctly points out that this argument is premised on the idea that logically proper names are the paradigm of referring expressions.

Evans does advance his own two arguments against treating definite descriptions as referring expressions, but it seems to me that his criticism can also be met. Evans notes first that, if definite descriptions are to be interpreted in this manner, then the reference relation must be relativized to worlds, times, and assignments to the variables bound by higher quantifiers that a description may contain.²⁵⁰ The reference relation must be relativized to a world because in the narrow scope reading of

It is possible that the teacher of Alexander the Great is not a subtle metaphysician

we have to assign a value to the world variable that is existentially quantified. For each particular world that is thus assigned, we will determine, if any, a certain denotation of the definite description. We also have to relativize the reference relation to a time to account for the narrow scope reading of “The U.S. president will be a woman,” that is,

There is a moment t_I in the future such that the U.S. president at t_I is a woman.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 55-56.

Finally, we have to relativize the reference relation to an assignment made by a sequence to the free variables that occur in the description (if any). Thus, in the narrow scope reading of the description occurring in

The president of each country is a popular politician.

we can argue that, relative to an assignment of a specific country to the variable that is bound by the universal quantifier, we can determine whether the description denotes or not (I assume that the time of evaluation is fixed by the moment when the utterance was made). Evans proceeds to argue, first, that relativizing the reference relation as described above is too cumbersome and, second, that other referring expressions are attributed semantic properties that are never utilized, because tokens of such expressions do not change their reference. Let me address each concern in part.

The first problem seems to be that the required relativization is a theoretical complication that we can easily dispense with, if we choose to treat descriptions as quantified phrases. However, such metatheoretical considerations have already been addressed in Classical Descriptivism. It is true that spelling out the descriptive material that informs one's conception of an individual is overkill, which is precisely why names are a handy way of expressing the same thought that can be expressed by the lengthy sentences containing descriptions. A Descriptivist can accept that, for all practical purposes, we can fix the reference of "Aristotle" to Aristotle and go on to symbolize a sentence such as "Aristotle is wise" as "*Wa*." The only point he would like to stress is that the referential powers of the name are derivative from the denotational powers of the descriptive material that the name is associated with. Names are used because they are useful shortcuts. They provide an expeditious way of avoiding communicational overload.

The second problem is that tokens of pronouns or demonstratives should also be interpreted as referring relative to a world, time, and singular term assignment (note that this is based on the assumption that there is only one kind of relation of reference, which I will not argue against). Because a tokened demonstrative, for instance, is rigid, it will never change its reference relative to any kind of assignment. If I say “He is reading philosophy,” while pointing at Henry, the content of what I uttered will not change if I evaluate its truth-value at a world where, at the same time and in the same location, I am looking at Paul. Evans takes this to show that treating descriptions as referential terms implies that other referring expressions are assigned features that are never detectable.

Let me remark first that the argument assumes that descriptions are not rigid terms. Evans’s notation makes this apparent. While analyzing the proposal that the relation of reference is relativized to a world, he reformulates principle (P)

(P) If $R(t_1 \dots t_n)$ is atomic and $t_1 \dots t_n$ are referring expressions, then $R(t_1 \dots t_n)$ is true iff $\langle \text{the referent of } t_1, \dots \text{the referent of } t_n \rangle$ satisfies R .

as

(P’) If $R(t_1 \dots t_n)$ is atomic and $t_1 \dots t_n$ are referring expressions, then $R(t_1 \dots t_n)$ is true_w iff $\langle \text{the referent}_w \text{ of } t_1, \dots \text{the referent}_w \text{ of } t_n \rangle$ satisfies_w R .²⁵¹

The idea in (P’) is that if I want to evaluate the truth of “The teacher of Alexander the Great is wise” at world w_1 , then I first have to identify the reference of the description at w_1 . Yet if we hold that descriptions are similar to demonstratives, it is possible to assess the value of the

²⁵¹ Ibid.

above utterance at w_I , while holding that the reference of the description must be assessed, say, at the actual world. That is, if the referring expressions have their content determined at the actual world w^* , then P' should be reformulated to say that

(P'') If $R(t_1 \dots t_n)$ is atomic and $t_1 \dots t_n$ are referring expressions whose content is defined at w^* , then $R(t_1 \dots t_n)$ is true _{w} iff \langle the referent _{w^*} of t_1 . . . the referent _{w^*} of t_n \rangle satisfies _{w} R .

If the description is on the subject position and its indices are not captured by other quantifiers, like the world-index may be captured by a modal operator, then the description acts as a referential expression.

However, Evans' second objection goes deeper than just remarking that definite descriptions are not rigid. Even if we assume that they are in fact so, we still have to explain why they can change their denotation at another fully-described world, while pronouns and demonstratives seem unable to exhibit similar variability. Suppose I describe in complete detail a world and then go on to say "At this world, the U.S. president is a Democrat." If the description is given narrow scope, according to my proposal, we should be taking it to denote an individual (if any) at the domain of that world. A pronoun does not appear to be able to vary its reference, when the context of utterance has changed. If I say, "At a context similar to the present one, where Henry is engaged in the same actions and utters the same words, it is true that I am tall," the first-person pronoun still refers to me, not to Henry. Likewise, if I am looking at a red cup sitting on the desk and say "At a context where I am engaged in similar actions, but I am pointing at a black cup, this is filled with coffee," I should be taken to say that in the alternative scenario the red cup is filled with coffee, not the black one.

But are pronouns and demonstratives so intimately connected to the context of utterance that we cannot discover cases where they are similarly ambiguous as to the scope they should be assigned? Consider the following examples, where the ambiguity is salient:

(uttered by Henry who talks to Paul) Last Friday, I saw you sitting on that chair and thinking whether the following is true: I am tall.

(uttered in New York) In Paris, you were avidly searching the Internet to discover whether the following is true: It's colder here than in Barcelona.

It is clear that eliminating the colon and reading the resulting sentence produces a reading of the indexical that latches onto the context of utterance. Nonetheless, the above sentences are ambiguous in the same way in which the following is ambiguous:

(uttered at w_1) The following is true: The U.S. president is a Democrat in w_2 .

So pronouns and demonstratives are not after all completely dissimilar to definite descriptions in regard to the way they secure their referents.

Let us now move to reviewing two other arguments against treating definite descriptions as referring expressions. The first argument I want to discuss, is that one can quantify into a definite description. Consider the following examples:

- (1) Mary's father is rich.
- (2) The father of some girl is rich.
- (3) The father of every girl is rich.

The step from the first to the second sentence is an example of existential generalization. The third sentence is a variation on the second, where the existential quantifier is replaced by the universal one. It is clear that the definite descriptions in the second and third examples do not denote, when they take narrow scope relative to the existential or universal quantifiers. Yet it seems to me that the definite description in the first example does act as a singular term.

The argument assumes that, because one can bind into a certain term, the term cannot be referential. Yet consider the example of a free variable under a direct assignment. The variable does denote in these conditions and yet it can certainly be bound by a quantifier. Should we infer that free variables under direct assignment are not singular terms? But then again, if they are not, what other terms can be reasonable candidates? In response to this, one can attempt to draw on Neale's distinction between wholly-binding and binding-into.²⁵² A free variable under direct assignment is wholly-bound by a quantifier. The description in the first example is bound-into leading to the second and third examples, in virtue of the fact that the quantifiers wholly-bound the variables. The reply would be that terms that can be wholly-bound are referential, but those that can only be bound-into cannot be so.

It is not clear to me why employing the above distinction is not begging the question by means of terminological creativity and assuming that, where there is structure, referentiality is ruled out. It is open to a Descriptivist to insist that, whenever a description is bound by a higher quantifier, it does not act as a singular term. If the description is not bound by a quantifier, then it does designate, even if it contains one or more quantifiers. Thus, the utterance of "The tallest Chinese in the world is unhappy" contains a description on the subject position, where a universal quantifier is embedded. The utterance says that

[The x : x is Chinese & $(\forall y)$ (y is Chinese \supset x is taller than y)] x is unhappy

²⁵² Neale, "This, That, and The Other," 176.

and I hold that the description acts as a singular term to refer to the tallest Chinese, because the quantifier is contained in the description and does not bind into it. One consequence of this position is that, if one says with Soames “There is a possible world where Bill believes that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician,” one does not attribute to Bill any singular thought. Assume that the description giving the meaning of “Aristotle” is the actual *D*. Then, the logical form of this report is

There is a possible world such that $(\exists F)(\exists x)\{\text{Bill believes that } (\exists y)(y \text{ is the unique } F \text{ \& } y \text{ is subtle metaphysician}) \text{ \& } x \text{ is the unique } F \text{ \& } x = \text{the actual } D\}$

In other words, what is said is that there is at least one world, where there is at least a property that singles out the individual that is the actual *D* and where Bill believes that the unique individual having this property is a subtle metaphysician. The report only assigns to Bill a belief connected to an individual, but stops short from assigning to him a singular belief. In contrast, if we specify completely a possible world w_I , then the report “In w_I , Bill believes that Aristotle is a subtle metaphysician” attributes to Bill a singular belief, because in describing the world, we have already determined who Aristotle is.

In general, the description “the x : Fx ” has the semantic properties of the variable. If the variable is bound by a higher quantifier, then it does not have the role of a singular term and the description in turn does not have this role either. If the variable is not bound, then its interpretation can only come by direct assignment and the description acts as a singular term.

The final argument I want to review is intimately related to the central role that philosophers opposing Cartesian epistemology give to singular terms. If I look at a red cup on the table and all background conditions for normal perception are met, I shall be in a state that is essentially related to the red cup. In other words, irrespective of my potential doubts

about the veracity of what I am aware, I shall enter into a perceptual relation with an individual substance, which cannot be overridden by any other mental state. Let us say that, whenever I am related to an individual substance in this manner, I am acquainted with it. The foundational connection between the mind and the world that is revealed when the subject is acquainted with an individual is threatened once we allow the descriptive material expressed by a definite description to enter the composition of a singular thought. As it is plain that we can conjure up any descriptive material whenever we wish, irrespective of whether there is something answering to it or not, entertaining a singular thought is not guaranteed any longer to involve being essentially en rapport with a part of the world. Singular thoughts cannot be arrived at on a whim.

The proposal that I endorse is at loggerheads with the chain of thought sketched above. We do arrive at singular thoughts on a whim. This is what fictional literature is all about. What makes a mental state a singular thought is not a supposed connection with the world, but the logical form of that state or the structure in which the conceptual material is disposed. Singular thoughts do not require any special ability or prior connection to an existent.

I can entertain the singular thought that the tallest Chinese is wise. This does not grant me automatically the truth of what I am thinking or give me a justification for thinking so. I can, similarly, think that the first newborn in the twenty-second century is a boy and entertain a singular thought. Whether humans will still exist by that time and whether they will still be able to bear children is completely orthogonal on my having a singular thought.

That such liberality will allow for a degree of indeterminacy is not a reason in itself to deny that singular thoughts can be entertained at will. Suppose that I come to think that Henry's friend that I saw at the party last night is tall. Unbeknownst to me, there was nobody in the direction I was looking when I came to hold this belief. A deceptive play of light and

shadow made it seem as if somebody was sitting next to Henry. Suppose also that you fell for the same trick. Do we share the same thought or not? When the perceptual circumstances are stable, we are inclined to give a positive answer to it. But even if we deny that we could share the same hallucination, this does not entail that we did not separately entertain a singular thought. Acquaintance is not a prerequisite for having such a thought. A thought is singular solely because of the way in which its components are structured.

CONCLUSION

My aim in this dissertation has been to defend a variety of Descriptivism. I have argued that our thoughts are about individuals in virtue of including descriptive identifying information regarding them and that utterances of sentences embedding proper names convey this type of information. The thought expressed by such an utterance comprises exclusively concepts. Language inherits intentionality from the level of thought. Thoughts are about individuals because concepts are unsaturated entities which require completion by an object (the intentional object) and because certain conceptual structures can target only one individual. In addition, singular thoughts comprise concepts whose application is confined to the environment where the intentional object is said to exist. That is, the definite descriptions which express the qualitative specifications associated with the name's referent are two-dimensional terms, best analyzed as a free logic variety of that-terms (terms which can be meaningful, while empty). The practice of using a name derives from our ability to store identifying information in clusters that are adjusted throughout the life of the subject in order to keep track of the correct object. This practice is premised on the idea that the same singular thought can be expressed by two subjects who associate with name tokens distinct qualitative information. Type identity among name tokens used in a linguistic community is premised on the subject's disposition to incorporate in his cluster identifying information concerning the name's referent, employed by other subjects in his community. Eliminating old information from, incorporating new information in, and readjusting the weights in a cluster is a process sensitive to contextually-available information. Thoughts are singular because of their make-up (their "architecture"). Acquaintance is not a necessary condition for having a singular thought.

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