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Reference and Form

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Sainsbury has done as much as anyone to make space, within a theory of reference, for empty referring expressions and empty referential thoughts. He does this by proposing an overall theory of reference that rejects the common dichotomy between Millianism, on the one hand, and descriptivism, on the other. In my view, this is all for the good. However, I'd like to draw out a connection within his account, between *reference as a functional-modal notion* and *simple, name-like mental syntax* or *form*. I take this connection to play an important role in Sainsbury's overall view, and think connections of this kind are under-explored in the existing literature. My aim here is not so much to reject or argue against connecting reference to name-like syntax, but rather to elaborate this connection and interrogate it.

Why focus on this connection?

Though Sainsbury's direct focus is often on the coherence of empty referential expressions and thoughts, he can be seen, more broadly, to reject a traditional Russell-inspired conception of reference. There are different variations on this traditional picture (I won't worry about details here), but the general idea is that we can understand referential expressions and thoughts in terms of several distinctive features or 'marks', which span syntax, semantics and epistemology (Sainsbury, 2020). Referential expressions and thoughts have simple syntax or form, have their referents *as* their semantic values (and so require a referent in order to be meaningful), and require (on the part of interpreters and thinkers) some special causal, information or epistemic relation with their referents (e.g., acquaintance, or some contemporary variant)).[1] In contrast, Sainsbury is one of several contemporary philosophers who deny that all these traditional features align and delineate the category of referential expressions and thoughts.[2] He proposes a functional and modal conception of linguistic and mental reference, which is stripped of much of the traditional Russellian epistemic and semantic baggage. However, as I read him, he maintains a connection between (functional-modal) reference and simple, name-like *mental* syntax or form (one might say, 'non-descriptive' mental syntax, though he does not talk this way himself). He is not alone in this.[3]

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[1] See Sainsbury (2020) for one specification of the feature associated with the traditional conception.

[2] Others who also deny this are Harman (1977), Jeshion (2010), Taylor (2010, 2021), Hawthorne and Manley (2012), among others.

[3] Those mentioned in fn 2, who reject a Russell-inspired epistemology of reference, also endorse this connection (though in different ways).

Discussion of views that reject the traditional Russell-inspired picture of reference tend to focus on their rejection of Russelian epistemology, and to ask the question, 'can the notion of semantic reference be successfully divorced from its association with some form of distinctive epistemic, causal relation to a referent?'. However, in my view, it is also worthwhile asking, 'should the notion of semantic reference remain connected to the traditional syntactic or formal marks that are associated with it?'. I want to suggest here that, in connecting reference to name-like mental syntax, we raise several unanswered questions which deserve more attention. This is, in part, because the notion of simple or name-like syntax is itself unclear and potentially equivocal and, in part, because, to the extent that do we have a clear grip on this notion, it may not be connected with semantic reference in the way proposed. Ultimately, this might give us reason to question the traditional Russell-inspired view of reference from a different angle, or perhaps to ask if recent disruptions of it have gone far enough.

1. Sainsbury's Conception of Linguistic Reference

My first aim is to illustrate that Sainsbury proposes an essentially *functional-modal conception of reference*. To do this, I'll focus first on his account of linguistic reference, deferring discussion of his account of mental reference for Section 2 of the paper. My discussion will set aside a range of details that are important for other purposes and focus on four related points.

Firstly, Sainsbury's view is that an expression can contribute to truth-conditions in the distinctive manner of a referential expression without actually having a referent. This is so because an expression is a referring expression iff it satisfies a slightly amended version of Evans's Principle P (Evans 1982, 49):

Sainsbury's Principle P (SP)   If S is a sentence in which an n-place concept expression R is combined with referring expressions $t_i \dots t_n$, then S is true iff <the referent of t_i > … <the referent of t_n > satisfies R; and is false iff it is not true.[4]

Empty referring expressions can satisfy SP in part because (unlike Evans's principle) it specifies *falsity* conditions for sentences combining concept expressions with referring expressions, and these are consistent with a negative free logic.[5] Furthermore, in the overall truth-theory in which SP features, expressions do not contribute to truth-conditions in the manner envisaged by Millians (or standard neo-Fregeans)—that is, by being associated with an object (in which case, no object implies no contribution).[6] Rather, they contribute by being associated with a *reference condition*. This reference

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[4] Sainsbury (2005) 80. 'Singular term' in Evans's version is replaced by 'referring expression', and it is specified that the descriptions within '<' and '>' are to be regarded as themselves being referring expressions (in order to generate the right possible worlds t-conditions). More on rigidity below.
[5] See Sainsbury (2005, 64-75). See also Burge (1974) 'Truth and Singular Terms', to which Sainsbury appeals.
[6] Sainsbury's approach is resolutely truth-theoretic. He does not make use of propositions conceived as sequences of entities or of understanding as a relation to those entities (2005, 47, 61-2).

condition guarantees, for example, that a referring expression like 'Venus' refers to nothing *other than* Venus, though it could fail to refer at all (Sainsbury 2005, 46, 73-4).

Second, the way that referring expressions contribute to truth-conditions is a symptom of the fact that their *function* is to refer. But, how should we understand the function to refer? Put simply, the function to refer is the function of introducing an object such that one's sentence or discourse can say something about *it*.[7] When one uses a referring expression such that it actually *performs* its function, one introduces an object such that the truth or falsity of what one says depend on how things are with *that thing*. SP reflects this role.

This leads us to the third point that is important for our purposes. The function to introduce an object is the source of a fact essential to referential expressions: it is part of their function that they are *rigid* (78). To accommodate empty cases, the preferred notion of rigidity is projection of actual reference across all worlds (RWR, 76). The intuitive idea might be put as follows. Since a referring expression's function is to introduce an object, its meaning is tied to the particular object it introduces, if any.[8] Thus, there is a certain *sort* of essential connection between a referential term and its referent—though not the sort of essential connection traditionally assumed by Millians and standard neo-Fregeans.[9] On Sainsbury's view, it is part of a referential expression's function to refer (at all worlds) to nothing *other than* the object it actually introduces. If it *fails* to introduce an object at the actual world, it fails to refer at all worlds. SP reflects this essential modal property of referring expressions because the metalanguage descriptions within '<' and '>' are themselves to be regarded as rigid (Sainsbury 2005, 79).

Sainsbury's view is that all referential expressions are rigid but, as we know, not all rigid expressions are referential. For example, non-referential definite descriptions which pick out objects by their necessary properties are modally rigid.[10] However, on Sainsbury's view as I understand it, referential expressions are distinguished by being rigid *in virtue of their function*, or as part of their function.[11]

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[7] I'll limit my discussion, here and in the remainder of the paper, to the singular referential case. This involves setting aside plural referential terms and compound referential terms (e.g., 'Russell and Whitehead'). I note, however, that, though Sainsbury also often sets these cases aside and focusses on the singular referential case, he takes particular notice of them and leaves space to accommodate them within his account.

[8] In other words, what's at issue is *de jure* not simply *de facto* rigidity. See Kripke (1980).

[9] That is, not one whereby the term's contribution to t-conditions depends on the existence of a referent. See Sainsbury (2005), 83-4.

[10] The claim that there are *non*-referential but *rigid* definite descriptions is consistent with Sainsbury's view that some definite descriptions are referential, and these ones will be rigid. Cases of referential definite descriptions discussed by Sainsbury (and others) are not necessarily ones that pick out objects by their necessary properties. For Sainsbury (2005) they are rather definite descriptions for which the standard intentions for an ordinary use are *referential* (179-88). See Section 3 of the current paper for discussion.

[11] I'm not sure that Sainsbury ever explicitly claims that rigidity *in virtue of function* distinguishes referential expressions from non-referential rigid expressions, so I'll emphasise that this is my interpretation of the view. Note also that rigidity in virtue of function is not quite the same as Kripke's (1980) notion of *de jure rigidity* (though I'll set aside questions about the relation between these notions).

Fourth, the idea that referring expressions are expressions which have the function to refer allows for empty referring expressions because a thing may fail to perform its function. For Sainsbury, empty referring expressions are like broken pencils or malformed hearts:

> 'A pencil is for writing, a heart for pumping blood. A broken pencil is still a pencil, even though it cannot be used to write; a malformed heart is still a heart, even though it cannot pump blood. A referring expression which fails in its function of introducing an object is still a referring expression' (Sainsbury 2005, 93)

A function tells us what something 'normally' does or is supposed to do. That a thing fails to do what it ought does not imply that we should reconceive what its function is. In Sainsbury's negative free logical framework, a referring expression must successfully perform its function—that is, must refer to something—in order to be used to express a *truth*. However, it can be used to express falsehoods whilst *maintaining* its function but failing to perform it (RWR, 130-1). In contrast, there is a common (Russell-inspired) move, whereby the emptiness of an *apparently* referential expression is theorized in terms of hidden complexity and, therefore, hidden function. The idea is that, since the function of a referring expression is to refer to something, one that does not do so must be reconceived as a semantically complex expression whose function is not (as it appears) to refer.[12] It is absolutely central to Sainsbury's view that he rejects this move.

Thus, Sainsbury provides us with a conception of linguistic reference, which I will describe as *functional-modal*. An expression is a referring expression iff it has the function to introduce an object, and thereby contributes to truth-conditions in the manner captured by SP. This means referring expressions are *rigid in virtue of their function*, though they can be empty. The notion of interest here is 'functional-modal', and is divorced from epistemic requirements of the traditional 'Russell-inspired' kind.

2. Sainsbury on Mental Reference

Sainsbury offers an account of mental reference that is structurally similar to his account of linguistic reference (Sainsbury 2005, 216). His account of mental reference involves our clearest instance of the connection between functional-modal reference, and simple, name-like syntax or form.

Sainsbury's account of mental reference is built around the notion of an *individual concept*. An individual concept is the mental analogue of a referring expression. So, I take it, thinking a thought that employs one, is thinking a distinctively referential thought. The functional-modal properties of referential linguistic expressions apply fairly straightforwardly to individual concepts. Just as a referential expression is a linguistic vehicle with the function to refer, an individual concept is a mental vehicle with the function to refer. As in the linguistic case, this can be understood as the

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[12] In *Thinking about Things*, roughly the same move is also helpfully discussed as Humean (Sainsbury 2018, 151-56)

function to introduce an object, such that the rest of the thought can do the mental equivalent of 'say' something about it.[13] I will assume that we can understand the contribution made by an individual concept to the truth conditions of a whole thought in which it features in terms of a mental analogue of the principle SP. Like referential linguistic expressions, thoughts employing individual concepts can be empty. Like empty referential expressions, empty individual concepts are like malfunctioning hearts or broken pencils: they have the function to introduce an object, but fail to perform that function (RWR 238). Similarly, individual concepts are rigid in virtue of their function, in the sense that their actual reference (including lack of actual reference) is projected across all worlds.[14]

As with Sainsbury's account of linguistic reference, this yields a conception of mental reference that is *functional-modal*, and does away with the particular kind of causal-epistemic features associated with reference according to a traditional (Russell-inspired) picture. Possession and use of an individual concept—and therefore, thinking a referential thought—does not require that the concept has a referent (Sainsbury 2005, 235-8), does not require acquaintance with the concept's referent (if there is one) (2005, 2020), and does not require a special kind of knowledge-which of the concept's referent (again, if there is one) (Sainsbury 2005, 226-9; 2020).

The connection between mental reference and simple, name-like mental syntax or form seems to be straightforward. An individual concept is described as 'a proper name in Mentalese', so it seems that referential thoughts are thoughts that employ simple, name-like mental vehicles.[15] What this means about the nature of such vehicles is part of what will be at issue in Section 4, but we can import what Sainsbury (2020) says about simple, name-like syntax as a starting point. For a vehicle to be *name-like* is for it to be a non-quantificational concept capable of standing in the conceptual analogue of subject position; for it to be *simple* is for it to have no parts that are themselves concepts (Sainsbury 2020, 23).

In addition to claiming that individual concepts are proper names in Mentalese, Sainsbury is relatively explicit that we can appropriately *categorise* mental states as employing individual concepts (or not)—that is, as being referential or not—according to their internal syntax or form. For example, he notes that the ascription, 'John wants a girl to marry him' could be true in virtue of three possible states of the world: 1) a state in which John simply want to no longer be a bachelor, 2) a state in which there is a particular girl, Martha, such that John wants to marry her, or 3) a state in which John *falsely* believes that William has a sister, Martha, and wants to marry her. In Sainsbury's view, the third state (as well as the second) involves a referential thought on John's part, albeit an empty one (Sainsbury 2005, 235). The justification is that John's thought in the third state shares 'the internal configuration' of his thought in the second state (and presumably differs in this respect from his thought in the first state). Given the assumption that facts about mental syntax or form

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[13] Presumably this involves something like predicating certain properties/relations of that object.
[14] See Sainsbury (2005), 216-7 and Ch. 7.
[15] A reminder: I am focussing here on the singular referential case.

amount to, or are constituted by, facts about internal configuration and structure, this implies that we can classify thoughts as referential (or not) according to their syntax or form.

This may or may not also mean that thoughts are referential *in virtue of* their non-descriptive form or syntax, though, as we'll now see, Sainsbury argues elsewhere for a claim that implies, more or less, that simple, name-like mental syntax *generates* referentiality of thought.

Sainsbury (2020, 34-6) endorses the claim that thoughts with *non-empty name-like syntax* are *object-involving*. This is not the same as the claim that thoughts with name-like syntax are referential in Sainsbury's sense, but does imply it. A thought is *object-involving*, according to the terminology in Sainsbury (2020, 22), iff, for some object x, and all worlds w, the truth of the thought at w depends on how things are with x. A thought being object-involving therefore means that it is rigid in Sainsbury's preferred sense—its actual reference is projected across worlds—but also requires that it actually refers. A thought with name-like syntax must also be non-empty in order to be object-involving (Ibid, 23-4). We have seen that Sainsbury's conception of reference is essentially modal: it is tied to rigidity. However, since referential thoughts can be empty, a thought can be referential without being object-involving. Since Sainsbury holds that the *non-empty* name-like syntax of a thought implies that it is object-involving, I assume he also accepts that name-like syntax (including the empty case) entails rigidity. This still leaves us one step short of the claim that the name-like syntax of a thought entails that it is referential (has the function to refer, or is rigid as part of its function). However, I also take it that the rigidity of a thought with name-like syntax will indeed be rigidity in virtue of function. Thus, I assume that Sainsbury holds that a thought possessing name-like mental syntax will be referential.

Given this, I take Sainsbury (2020) to endorse the claim that simple name-like mental syntax *generates* referential thought. Sainsbury (2020) endorses what he calls *Harman's Thesis* (Harman 1977). This is the view that one can introduce a thought with name-like syntax through an act of descriptive reference-fixing, and that the introduction of name-like syntax will generate a thought that is object-involving (if it is non-empty). For example, one can introduce a name, 'Newman 1', which is stipulated to refer to the first child born in the twenty-second century. This would make it possible for one to start out (before introducing the name) with the (non-rigid, non-referential) thought that the first child to be born in the twenty-second century will likely be born in China, but end up, by *using the name*, with the (rigid, referential) thought that Newman1 will likely be born in China. Sainsbury claims that the mechanism by which this new thought could be produced is easy to detail (Sainsbury 2020, 32). Simple, name-like syntax in thought can be produced at will, and creates scope insensitivity and therefore rigidity (Ibid, 35). Such rigidity exists in virtue of function and so amounts to referential thought.

I take this to mean that the connection between functional-modal reference and simple, name-like syntax is biconditional and explanatory: individual concepts are names in mentalese and simple, name-like syntax generates functional-modal reference. I therefore take it that Sainsbury provides us

with a conception of functional-modal mental reference that is divorced of traditional Russell-inspired epistemic marks, but which maintains something akin to the traditional syntactic marks. Two possible questions could be asked about this conception. We could, and people often do, ask whether it is possible to divorce mental reference from its traditional epistemology.[16] But we could also ask whether functional-modal reference should be connected to simple, name-like mental syntax? That is, has Sainsbury's disruption of the Russell-inspired picture of reference gone far enough, or are there connections in the traditional picture that deserve further interrogation?

3. Referential Expressions and Mental Reference

As we have seen, the most straightforward connection between functional-modal reference and simple, name-like mental syntax is found in Sainsbury's account of mental reference. However, in a less straightforward way, Sainsbury also connects *linguistic* reference to simple, name-like *mental* syntax.[17] The function to refer in *language* is fleshed out partially in terms of the conditions on felicitous use and understanding of referential expressions, and these conditions involve a role for referential mental states—that is, mental states with simple, name-like syntax.

In general, an expression is said to be properly construed as referential in our semantics—that is, as having the function to refer—partly in virtue of the intentions that are standard requirements for ordinary, literal uses (Sainsbury 2005, 179). When one uses a referring expression, one intends to say something whose truth or falsity, actual or counterfactual, depends on how things are with some particular object (Sainsbury 2005, 81). If this condition is true of a speaker, we can say that she uses her term with an *intention to refer*.[18] Felicitously using a referential expression requires having an intention to refer. However, we would like a clearer, more concrete sense of the nature of such intentions. Sainsbury's remarks about what it takes to felicitously use a *referential definite description* provide this. According to Sainsbury, intentions to refer come in (at least) two different kinds. The first are *object-involving intentions to refer*. One has an object-involving intention to refer only if there is an object, x, such that one intends for the truth or falsity of what one says to turn on how things are with x (Sainsbury 2005, 180). A second kind are *non-object-involving intentions to refer*. One has a non-object-involving intention to refer only if one intends that there *be* an object, x, such that the truth or falsity of what one says turns on how things are with x (Ibid., 180). The two kinds of intention to refer are said to differ by whether the quantifier governing the occurrence of 'x' takes wide or narrow scope—that is, whether it lies outside the content of the intention, or within it. Object-involving (wide scope) intentions to refer are clearly not possible when one uses an empty referring expression and, since we want to make space for empty referring expressions, they cannot be

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[16] See Jeshion (2010), Recanati (2010), Sawyer (2012), Genone (2014), Goodman (2018), Openshaw (2018), Jeonggyu (2022) and others for different kinds of discussion of this question.

[17] He denies that linguistic expressions must have simple, name-like linguistic syntax, e.g., by claiming that some definite descriptions are referential. See Sainsbury (2005) Ch. 5.

[18] Sainsbury calls these 'referential intentions' and, though this is natural terminology, I've amended it to avoid conflation of intentions to refer/referential intentions and intentions that are functionally-modally *referential* in the sense I've outlined. I take it that *intentions to refer* are not necessarily *referential*, in this sense, and that it's not the case that all intentions that are referential, are intentions to refer.

required for the use of a referring expressions. However, non-object-involving intentions to refer are possible in such cases, and constitute a kind of 'minimal' requirement on the felicitous use of a referring expression. The basic idea is this. In order to felicitously use a referring expression, it need *not* be the case that there exists an object such that the speaker intends *it* to be that upon which the truth/falsity of what she says depends. However, she must at least *intend* that there exists an object such that her *audience* is in a position to think about *it* and consider *it* what's relevant to the t/falsity of what she says.

A case illustrates the nature of the requirement. You have a tennis court, and invite me over to play. I have never seen or heard about your court before but, when I see that there is no center net on the court, I ask, 'where's the net?'. Let's stipulate that this is a referential definite description: the function of the expression 'the net' is to introduce a particular net (your court's center net) and the expression rigidly picks out that particular net if it picks out anything at all. What is required for my felicitous use of this referential expression? My use can be felicitous whether or not there *in fact* exists a net such that the answer to the question, 'where's the net?', depends (actually and counterfactually) on where it is.[19] However, it *is* required, at least, that I *intend* that there exists a net such that *you* are in a position to think about *it*, and to regard the answer to the question, 'where's the net?' as depending on how things are with *it*. This intention on my part essentially amounts to a belief that *someone* participating in the conversation is in a position to have an object-involving (wide-scope) mental state about the referent of my referring expression. This belief can be *false* but, without it, I have not felicitously used a referring expression. In contrast, the use of a *non*-referring expression would not require either an object-involving mental state on my part, *nor* the assumption that my interlocutor is in a position to have one. On a natural enough reading, this requirement on felicitous use of a referring expression amounts to a requirement that one *either* possess a (non-empty) referential mental state about the expression's referent, *or* possess a belief that one's interlocutor is in a position to have one.[20]

Another connection between linguistic reference and mental reference comes with Sainsbury's account of what it takes to *understand* uses of referential expressions. On Sainsbury's view, understanding a referential expression requires that one use an *individual concept* (Sainsbury 2005, 169). And, as we've seen, an individual concepts are the analogue, in thought, of referential expressions in language, and are described as proper names in Mentalese (Ibid., 146). That is, they are *name-like mental vehicles* whose function is to think about a particular object, which come with the general possibilities attached to referential linguistic expressions in Sainsbury's framework (they can

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[19] I could use the expression felicitously though your court has never had a net.

[20] Perhaps it's worth noting my hesitation over this reading. Both object-involving and non-object-involving intentions to refer are characterized in terms of the scope properties of certain *ascriptions* of these mental states, rather than in terms of features of the mental states themselves. I'm therefore unsure whether it's correct to construe object-involving intentions to refer as (non-empty) distinctively *referential* mental states. Presumably, however, the attitude ascriptions used to specify the requirements on felicitous use of a referring expression are *theoretical* ascriptions, or ascriptions intended to specify the mental states they ascribe from a theoretical perspective, so perhaps the natural reading is a fair one.

be employed despite lack of a determinate referent, etc.). This gives us another instance of the connection that of interest to me, between functional-modal reference, and simple, name-like mental syntax or form: referential expressions require for their understanding thoughts with simple or singular mental syntax.

Furthermore, the fact that use of an individual concept is required for the interpretation of an expression is sometimes used by Sainsbury to illustrate that the expression is properly categorised as semantically referential. For example, Sainsbury holds that certain anaphorically dependent pronouns are referential.[21] He illustrates this in part by claiming that the interpretation of these pronouns requires one to use an individual concept (specifically, to re-use one that is associated with the expression upon which the pronoun is anaphorically dependent).[22] The idea that one can categorise an expression as referential on the basis that a referential thought is required for its interpretation, *along with* the idea that our semantics should reflect the kinds of thoughts required for ordinary, literal uses might reasonably be taken to suggest that simple, name-like mental syntax is partially *explanatory* with respect to the existence of linguistic reference.

4. Reference and Name-like-Syntax

So far, I've outlined two instances of the connection Sainsbury makes between (functional-modal) reference and simple name-like mental syntax or form. I don't claim here that it is *incorrect* to connect reference with simple name-like mental syntax, but I do claim the connection is worthy of examination and clarification. I therefore begin with considerations that motivate a closer look.

In language, simple syntax arguably does not always yield rigidity (a requirement on reference for Sainsbury). For example, as used within the fictional world in which the James Bond stories take place, the expression 'Q' is simple and name-like in its syntax, but is not rigid. It is used *felicitously* in such sentences as, 'Q will meet James Bond at the National Gallery' (name-like syntax), and is used *truly* in such sentences as, 'Q might not have been a man' (non-rigid). Despite its simple, name-like syntax, the expression picks out whomever occupies the role of Quartermaster—that is, the head of the R&D division of MI6 that supplies James bond with his gadgets. On one way of putting things, 'Q' denotes a role or job-title, rather than functioning *semantically* like a name. Sainsbury does not claim that all referential expressions are syntactically simple (referential definite descriptions are not) but he does endorse Harman's Thesis, which implies that all syntactically name-like and simple expressions are referential. More to my point, it seems *prima facie* plausible that there could be an expression *in thought*—i.e., a concept—like 'Q'.

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[21] In particular, those dependent on indefinite noun phrases and names. These pronouns need not actually refer, but they have the function to refer and they require a referent in order for utterances employing them to be true (Sainsbury 2005, 131).

[22] In the case of anaphoric dependence on a name, this will be an individual concept associated with the name. In the case of anaphoric dependence on an indefinite noun phrase, it will be a new individual concept, that was introduced in order to interpret the indefinite (Sainsbury 2005, 146-9).

Relatedly, what exactly is the *nature* of the proposed connection between simple name-like syntax and (modal-functional) reference? It doesn't seem that it would hold in *all languages* (or all mental languages), or that it holds in natural languages by necessity or universally. Why not think that, for any meaning that is carried by a syntactically complex expression of, e.g., English, there could be a language *L* (or a mental language) in which *that very meaning* was carried by a syntactically simple expression? Could there not be a language *L* in which 'slab' was a syntactically simple expression which meant (in *L*) what 'bring me a slab' means in English, or in which 'POTUS' was a syntactically simple expression which meant (in *L*) what 'President of the United States' means in English? Perhaps this is not possible but, if not, it would be good to better understand why.

These initial considerations do not constitute an argument against Sainsbury's view, but merely a starting point, which suggests we need a better sense of why and how simple name-like syntax in thought should be connected with reference (in Sainsbury's functional-modal sense). Relatedly, I think it indicates that we should want to know more about the notion of simple, name-like mental syntax that is in use. To my mind, this notion is far from straightforward or clear.[23]

We can begin this discussion with an initial, 'skeletal' account of *simple, name-like mental syntax,* based on the way this notion is defined in Sainsbury (2020): a concept's being *syntactically simple* means that it has no parts that are themselves concepts, and its being *syntactically name-like* means that it is a non-quantificational concept capable of standing in the mental analog of subject position.

But Sainsbury also gives us more to go on. As we have seen, individual concepts are said to be concepts with the function to refer (a semantic claim), which are proper names in Mentalese (a syntactic claim). Sainsbury (2005) gives a more substantive (less skeletal) account of the properties of concepts with simple, name-like syntax, by elaborating the psycho-functional nature—that is, the information-processing role and structural features relevant to that role—of individual concepts.[24] I take syntactic features of thought to either be, or to be constituted by, psycho-functional facts or features. Thus, I take it that, by fleshing out the psycho-functional nature of individual concepts, Sainsbury fleshes out the syntactic category of *syntactically simple, name-like concept.*

Individual concepts are described as vehicles that persist through time and 'act as a receptacle for', or 'subsume', predicative information about a particular object (Sainsbury 2005, 221-2).[25] An

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[23] To be clear, I don't think this is merely Sainsbury's problem. Part of my motivation for the current discussion is the idea that we are often unclear, as theorists of reference, about this notion and its role in a theory of intentionality and reference.

[24] It's worth mentioning and forestalling a possible misunderstand based on terminological equivocation. I have described Sainsbury's conception of reference as 'functional-modal' and here appeal to 'psycho-functional' properties of mental states. Though both reference and mental syntax are, on my reading, to be spelled out in functional terms, the functional properties specified in categorizing each are distinct.

[25] I'll interpret talk of the concept acting as a 'receptacle' as a helpful metaphor, rather than as a heavy-duty claim to the effect that these concepts have containment structure. It's worth noting that those who posit mental files, and talk about them in this way, may also be interpreted in this way (see Goodman & Gray,

individual concept serves 'as a stable point around which information is added or subtracted' (Ibid., 223), allowing its possessors to organize information into object-sized and object-centered packages (Evans 1982, 126-7, as cited by Sainsbury 2005, 222.) Such concepts are distinct both from the objects they refer to (if any), and the particular qualitative information that they subsume (Ibid., 229, 224).

Sainsbury claims, firstly, that nothing in the nature of an individual concept *requires* there to be predicative information that is essential to its identity (Sainsbury 2005, 223). In some cases, for example, even information concerning properties that may be essential to the identity of the entity that is the *referent* of the concept, may fail to be subsumed by that concept, or may be retracted or revised over time. An individual concept may also subsume information that is not merely false of its referent, but necessarily false of it. For example, a concept whose referent is a particular human-being might fail to subsume, or might discard, the information, 'is human'. Similarly, it might subsume, 'is *not* human' or, 'is not a living thing' (Ibid, 223). Within the life of the same individual concept, particular information can be added at some time, subsumed for some duration of time, and then discarded at a later time. However, and most relevantly for *our* purposes, Sainsbury also makes the stronger claim that *no* individual concept has particular predicative information that is essential to its identity. He claims that, to the extent that predicative information is reference-determining for a thought, that thought does not employ an individual concept (Sainsbury 2005, 239) and that, to the extent that a concept is indeed an individual concept, it does not function in 'some distinctive descriptive way' whereby predicative information is essential to it (ibid. 241).

Essentially the same claims are also made elsewhere, but with more explicit discussion of their relation to questions about mental syntax. Recall that, according to Sainsbury (2020), a thinker who was previously only in a position to mentally 'describe' the first child to be born in the twenty-second century (as such) can introduce a syntactically simple, name-like *concept* referring to that unique child (if there is one). That is, she can introduce a mental analogue of the name, 'Newman1'. The syntactically simple, name-like concept thereby introduced, will be semantically referential and will have the psycho-functional features just outlined. Sainsbury also claims, in this connection, that there can be no such thing as a *mental descriptive name*, where a descriptive name is not merely a name introduced by an act of descriptive stipulation, but rather one which cannot 'shake off' the description to which it was linked at its introduction (Sainsbury 2020, 29). On his view, *any* concept that is descriptive in the sense that descriptive information is essential to it, is not only *semantically* descriptive, but also lacks simple, name-like syntax (Ibid, 30, 32-3). I take this to imply that Sainsbury holds that any thinker who introduces a mental analog of the name 'Newman1' with the description, 'the first child to be born in the twenty-second century', could come to believe, e.g., that Newman1 was not born in the twenty-second century.[26]

2022) but Sainsbury has also expressed skepticism about the file metaphor so there is more than one reason to read him this way (Sainsbury 2020, 28).

[26] That is, with a belief that employs her NEWMAN1 concept.

We have, then, a package of connections, which aligns descriptive information being essential to a concept with the absence of name-like syntax and the absence of the function to refer. It also aligns descriptive information being inessential to a concept with the presence of simple, name-like syntax and the function to refer. I want to ask why we should accept this package of connections.

On the face of things, we might question this picture in more than one way. First, we might wonder whether the psycho-functional profile just outlined yields a univocal notion of simple, name-like mental syntax. Second, we might ask why a concept for which descriptive information plays a privileged role could not be *simple*, and *name-like*.

First, it is not clear that the properties which are meant to spell out the psycho-functional profile of concepts with simple, name-like syntax are themselves aligned or unified.

It seems to me that there are several different *senses* in which descriptive information could be essential to a concept, and that these correspond to different *roles* that descriptive information that is subsumed by a concept can play with respect to that concept. For example, when claiming that predicative information is always inessential to an individual concept, Sainsbury discusses (what seem to me to be) two *distinct* roles that descriptive information could play with respect to a concept. The first is that of *reference-determination*. The descriptive information 'is the unique F' is reference-determining with respect to a concept iff the concept refers to whichever thing is the unique F in virtue of it being the unique F, and to nothing if there is no unique F. Sainsbury claims that descriptive information is never reference-determining for an individual concept (Sainsbury 2005, 239). The second role is that of being *essential to a concept's identity*. To clarify this role, we could say that the descriptive information 'is the unique F' is essential to a concept's identity iff subsumption of this information is part of the identity and persistence conditions for the concept. Sainsbury denies that descriptive information can play this role with respect to an individual concept when he claims that any information subsumed by an individual concept could be discarded *within the life of that concept* (Sainsbury 2005, 224, 236, 241). Plausibly, we could distinguish additional roles besides these. For example, Goodman (2016) distinguishes a *gatekeeping* role, which descriptive information could play with respect to a concept. Arguably, every concept must be associated with some 'information-marshaling strategy'[27]—that is, some method that determines which information will be subsumed by that concept, which will be rejected, discarded, and so forth. Descriptive information already subsumed by a concept could be 'essential' to it in the sense that it is central to this process.[28] For example, 'is the unique F' might play a gatekeeping role with respect to a concept if the only way that some *other* descriptive information, 'is G' can come to be subsumed by the concept is for the subject to have evidence that the unique F is also G.

It is plausible that descriptive information subsumed by a concept could play one of these roles, without playing some other. Perhaps, for example, descriptive information that is associated with a

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[27] The terminology of 'information-marshaling strategies' is taken from Dickie (2015).
[28] For further elaboration and discussion of gatekeeping by description, see Goodman (2022).

concept when it is introduced turns out to be false of the concept's referent, and is thereby not reference-determining. However, this information could still have played a gatekeeping role. This might happen in a case similar to one Sainsbury himself envisages (though for different purposes) (Sainsbury 2005, 241). One might introduce a simple, name-like concept, PLATO, which refers to Plato and is associated at the time of introduction with the description, 'the teacher of Aristotle'. One might then come to *realise* that Plato was in fact a helpful interlocutor for Aristotle, not his teacher. The description 'the teacher of Aristotle' cannot have been reference-determining, since it is (and has always been) false of the concept's referent.[29] However, this description could still have played an information-marshaling, or gatekeeping role, with respect to the concept.[30] It could be true that the subject has gone about subsuming any new information, 'is G' under her PLATO concept on the basis of whether she has evidence that Aristotle's teacher is G. A full account of such cases would of course require a story about how, if not by description, the reference of a concept like this one *is* determined.[31] However, this story is also required for cases that Sainsbury allows, in which a description that is used to create an individual concept turns out to be false of the concept's referent. For example, he envisages a case in which the referent of an individual concept associated with 'the cat' turns out not to be a cat, but a demon in feline shape (241). My case is different only in that I suggest that the non-reference-determining description could nonetheless play another 'essential' role.

Another example in which the different roles that a description could play with respect to a concept come apart involves the two roles that Sainsbury himself mentions: determining reference and being essential to a concept's identity. Imagine the case of the PLATO concept slightly differently to the way I have described it above: Plato *was* indeed the teacher of Aristotle but, after introducing the individual concept PLATO with the description 'the teacher of Aristotle', I come to *falsely* believe that Plato did not teach Aristotle and so discard the descriptive information 'the teacher of Aristotle'.[32] On a plausible enough view of the case so described, this description is reference-determining for the concept, though subsumption of it is nonetheless not part of the identity and persistence conditions for the concept. I can discard a concept's reference-determining description while the concept itself persists.

The broad point, for my purposes, is that the psycho-functional properties used to flesh out name-like mental syntax may not themselves always align with one another. This suggests, at least, that we lack a non-skeletal and unequivocal conception of what simple, name-like mental syntax amounts to.

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[29] Dickie (2015, Ch. 6) gives examples of cases where descriptions associated with a name at its introduction and throughout its use are false of the name's referent (see p. 222).

[30] It may of course be that the thinker must continue to believe that the referent is F for 'is F' to continue to play a gatekeeping role, but this is besides my point. The description was never reference-determining, since it referred all along to an individual who was not F, but the information did play a gatekeeping role.

[31] One answer might appeals to some non-obvious causal or informational connection to the referent. Dickie (2015, 2020) defends an alternative answer to this question that appeals to an epistemic or justificatory notion of 'cognitive focus'.

[32] This may in fact be the way Sainsbury himself was envisioning the case.

It is possible that an unequivocal conception of simple, name-like mental syntax is ultimately available. However, it seems possible to me that it is not, in the following sense. Perhaps our tendency, in the theory of mental reference, to appeal to a syntactic category of 'names in thought' comes from a too-simple projection onto the mind of the logical categories we often use to model mental states. In logic, we have a clear sense of how to categorise syntactic types and a clear sense of what counts as a syntactically simple, name-like expression. But it is possible that there is no mental joint that has claim to being *the* mental analog of the logical notion. If we are interested in the kind of psycho-functional features that Sainsbury uses to characterize individual concepts—and it seems reasonable that we should be—we might do better to think in terms of different (and sometimes diverging) psycho-functional or syntactic properties of concepts, and to examine the ways in which these are related to (functional-modal) reference. If this is the right approach, then reliance on a straightforward connection between mental reference and 'simple, name-like mental syntax' might be misleading, and Harman's thesis may either be false, or need to be reconceived in different terms.

But what of our initial, skeletal account of simple, name-like mental syntax? A second line of questions sets aside the concerns above, and simply asks why a concept that is descriptive in the sense that descriptive information plays an essential role (or many essential roles) could not be *simple* and *name-like*, in the terms of our initial, skeletal account.

Recall that a concept is *simple*, according to our skeletal account, if it lacks concepts as parts. Presumably it is complex if it has concepts as parts. It may seem natural enough that a concept being simple in this sense would preclude descriptive information being essential to it. However, I do not see why we should accept this. For a concept to subsume information is *not* for it to have *as a part* a concept that refers to or denotes that information.[33] On my reading of him, Sainsbury himself is clear about this. In his view, 'a subject subsumes some information under an individual concept *by entertaining a thought*, concerning the referent of the concept, if any, and concerning the properties specified by the information, if any, that the former possesses the latter' (2005, 222, italics mine). Furthermore, he shies away from a file-theoretic picture of concepts, which *may* be read to involve the claim that concepts subsume predicative information *by containing it*.[34] Regardless of whether I am correct that Sainsbury himself does not understand information subsumption in terms of containment of property concepts, notice the following. If we *were* to conceive of subsumption of the information 'is F' in terms of containment as a part of a concept referring to F-ness, then referential and non-referential concepts would *not differ* with respect to whether they were complex or simple. Individual concepts are said to subsume predicative information, but to do so *in*essentially. Thus, on the conception of subsumption I am rejecting, an individual concept would, at any time, have concepts as its parts. It would simply be said to change its parts over time. This

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[33] See, e.g., Recanati (2012) 39-40, n.12, where he stresses this.
[34] Though see Goodman & Gray (2022), and fn 25 of the current paper for dissent from this interpretation of the file view.

means, I think, that descriptive information being essential to a concept is not inconsistent with the concept being syntactically *simple*.

According to our skeletal conception, a concept is syntactically *name-like* when it is a non-quantificational concept capable of standing in subject position. Is the fact that subsumed information plays an essential role with respect to a concept inconsistent with it being syntactically *name-like*? I do not see why it would be. Presumably, all will agree that a concept for which subsumed descriptive information plays an essential role (or many) can occupy subject position. Sainsbury also specifies that the concept must also be *non-quantificational* in order to be syntactically name-like. However, I am unsure what this requirement comes to. It cannot be interpreted as a *semantic* requirement, for it is meant to be a feature of syntax. If it is interpreted as the requirement that the concept must be syntactically like a semantically non-quantificational expression, then this does not take us beyond our starting point: we have not specified any syntactic kind, and what's at issue is whether a certain mental semantics has specific mental syntactic implications, and vice versa.

Conclusion
I want to conclude by saying something about where these questions and considerations leave us.

As I have indicated already, I do not wish to claim anything as strong as that the connections Sainsbury makes between singular modal-functional reference and simple, name-like mental syntax are simply incorrect. I do hope, however, to have illustrated why it is worth examining them, and to have indicated why further discussion is required of the role that claims about mental syntax (in particular, simple, name-like mental syntax) ought to play within an overall theory of reference.

Part of the context in which connections between reference and simple, name-like syntax are often made is that they feature in accounts of reference that aim to 'break apart' the traditional, Russell-inspired marks of reference. These marks are semantic, epistemic and syntactic. It is now relatively common to claim that we should separate semantic reference in language and thought from a Russell-inspired epistemology, which aligns it with the need for acquaintance with a referent (or some suitably liberalized variant of acquaintance). However, by aligning semantic reference and simple, name-like syntax, those that make this claim rely, to at least some extent, on the notion of simple name-like syntax in order to partially explain the existence of (functional-modal) reference, or to elaborate its cognitive or psychological nature. One possible upshot of the discussion above is that the notion of simple, name-like syntax cannot be used to replace traditional epistemological accounts of semantic reference. This might motivate a re-examination of epistemic or causal elaborations of the distinctiveness of reference. Alternatively, it might suggest that views rejecting a neo-Russellian epistemology have not gone far *enough* in disrupting the traditional Russell-inspired picture of reference.

More generally, the discussion here is intended to motivate further examination of the connection between singular reference and mental syntax or form. It suggests, that appeals to mental syntax in

discussions of singular reference may need to move beyond a straightforward analogy with simple, name-like *logical* syntax when spelling out the distinctive syntactic features of referential thought, or at least that such appeals should aim for a clearer conception of simple, name-like mental syntax. Though I have not discussed my own views here, my discussion of Sainsbury's views, and the questions I have posed about them, are born of a sense that there *is* an important connection between mental reference and something that can perhaps be described as simple, name-like mental syntax, but also from a sense that this connection needs further elaboration, and requires more clarity about the category of simple, name-like syntax in thought.

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