Against Descriptive Names

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Abstract: Names like 'Neptune' and 'Vulcan' have lead some Millians to countenance a class of *descriptive* names. This is so, as, first, the closeness of the association between a descriptive name and its associated descriptive condition seems to show that the link between the name and the description must be semantic, and, second, as Millianism implies that names without bearers make no direct contribution to the propositions expressed by the sentences in which such names occur. In this paper we use the notion of an object-dependent convention to offer a novel motivation for Millianism. We then show that our way of motivating Millianism implies that the above two reasons for treating names like 'Neptune' and 'Vulcan' as descriptive have little force.

Key words: conventions, Millianism, descriptive names, non-referring names

1. INTRODUCTION

Some Millians countenance a distinct class of *descriptive names*, i.e. names that have descriptive content.[1] Paradigm cases of such descriptive names include 'Neptune,' with its associated descriptive condition 'the planet causing the irregularities in the orbit of Uranus,' and 'Vulcan,' with its associated descriptive condition 'the planet causing the irregularities in the orbit of Mercury.'[2] Of course, as it turns out, 'Neptune' refers, while 'Vulcan' does not.

In this paper we discuss two of the main problems that serve to push theorists towards the view that names like 'Neptune' and 'Vulcan' are descriptive. First, the close association between a descriptive name and its associated descriptive condition seems to show that the link between the name and the description is semantic, i.e. the 'Neptune'-problem. Second, the counter-intuitive nature of claiming that non-referring names have no semantic value, i.e. the 'Vulcan'-problem.

Concerning the first problem, we will show that Millianism has a principled basis for claiming that the close link between a putatively descriptive name and its associated description is non-semantic. Concerning the second problem, we give a principled reason for thinking that there can be names that do not have a semantic value.

2. OBJECT-DEPENDENT CONVENTIONS AND MILLIANISM

Our argument depends on the notion of an *object-dependent convention* (Smit 2021). Suppose that a set of subjects are in a room with ten balls that are constantly being moved around. The balls dif-

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fer by size and color. Periodically, the subjects are asked to pick out a specific ball and those who pick out the ball picked out by most others in the specific round win a cash prize. Such a scenario is a classic coordination game and we can expect a convention to emerge that serves to facilitate the coordination of the participants' behaviour.

The resultant convention need not involve a specific ball, and can be a *non-object-dependent* convention like 'In every round, pick out the ball furthest to the left.' Alternatively, the participants can attempt to coordinate on a *specific* ball that is to be picked out in every round. In such a case the convention is *object-dependent*. A convention is *object-dependent* in case it is the result of agents trying to involve a specific object in their coordination. Agents are portrayed as *trying* to involve a specific object in their coordination as there can be cases where the agents think that some specific object exists, yet it does not.

In the case of an object-dependent convention, subjects will need a cognitive fix on the specific ball in order to partake in the convention, i.e. subjects will need a way of recognizing and re-recognizing the ball that they are supposed to pick (Smit 2021: 286). These cognitive fixes can be distinct. Stipulate that the relevant ball is the only yellow ball and also the biggest ball. These criteria can independently serve to provide the cognitive fix needed by subjects in order to participate in the object-dependent convention. Alice can adopt the strategy 'In every round, choose the yellow ball' and Bob can adopt the strategy 'In every round, choose the biggest ball' in order to participate in the convention. The important thing to notice is that two *distinct* strategies, here termed 'proxy-rules,' are adopted in order to participate in a *single* convention. A multiplicity of such proxy-rules does not imply a multiplicity of conventions. Rather, it is simply in the nature of object-dependent conventions that they can be followed *via* a variety of proxy-rules (Smit 2021: 286).

Based on the above, Millianism can be motivated as follows:

(1)   Name-governing conventions are object-dependent conventions where language users attempt to pair a name and an object.

(2)   The contribution that a linguistic item makes to the proposition expressed by a sentence in which it occurs, if any, is determined by the convention governing its application.

(3)   The contribution that a name makes to the proposition expressed by the sentence in which it occurs, if any, is the object that the name is paired with by the convention governing the name.

Claim (1) is a claim in *foundational* semantics, namely the claim that our naming conventions are object-dependent, and claim (2) an intuitive constraint on the relation between conventions and propositions.[3] Claim (1) and claim (2) imply a claim in *descriptive* semantics, namely claim (3), which is our formulation of Millianism. Call the view that names have Millian semantic values in virtue of being governed by object-dependent conventions *Object Dependent Convention Millianism* (hereafter: *ODC-Millianism*).

If Millianism is true, then the main virtue of ODC-Millianism lies in the fact that it provides an explanation of *why* Millianism is true. ODC-Millianism derives Millianism from a more basic, metasemantic claim about the nature of name-governing conventions, and states that Millianism is true due to the fact that naming conventions are object-dependent conventions (claim (1)), coupled with the claim that propositional content is determined by convention (claim (2)).

In providing the above motivation for Millianism, ODC-Millianism also serves to highlight a useful theoretical constraint on any theory of the propositional content of names. If we accept (2), then any theory of propositional content incurs the burden of providing a statement of the nature of name-governing conventions that is consistent with it. This implies that insights from the theory

of conventions (such as the distinction between object-dependent and non-object-dependent conventions) can serve to inform semantic theory.

As, on ODC-Millianism, the convention governing a name is object-dependent, we portray it as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition on *following* a name-governing convention literally and correctly that the name-user use it to speaker-refer to the object, if any, that the name is conventionally paired with. Those who participate in a name-governing convention will require proxy-rules in order to do so. Such proxy-rules can be based on any condition (perceptual or cognitive) that the name-user believes is uniquely satisfied by the object that the convention pertains to. These conditions need to be rigidified in order to capture our referential intentions when making modal claims. Nothing in our view depends on how such rigidification is achieved; we use Kaplan's dthat operator[4] to do so and portray such proxy-rules as having the form 'Use N to speaker-refer to dthat[the F].'[5]

Speaker's reference is definitionally a matter of having a certain referential intention. We take intention to be a hyperintensional notion: even if dthat[the F] is the same object as dthat[the G], it does not have to be that the intention to speaker-refer to dthat[the F] is the same as the intention to speaker-refer to dthat[the G].[6] We also take intention to be a notion that is consistent with the nonexistence of its object: it is consistent that a speaker intends to speaker-refer to dthat[the F] even if there is no unique F.[7]

Our argument will be that ODC-Millianism offers a principled basis for showing that the link between a supposedly descriptive name and its associated description is non-conventional, i.e. non-semantic. This is because the motivation for recognizing a special class of descriptive names can be shown to confuse the proxy-rules used to follow a single convention with the content of the convention itself.

We discuss the matters of 'Neptune' and 'Vulcan' in turn.

3. THE CLOSE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN THE NAME AND THE DESCRIPTION

Prior to telescopic contact, there is a very close association between 'Neptune' and its associated description 'the planet causing the irregularities in the orbit of Uranus.'[8] The name is closely associated with the description in four distinct ways. First, it is used to introduce the name into the language. Second, it is the main description in the possession of downstream users of the name. Third, possession of the description is what full semantic competence concerning the name 'Neptune' consists in. Fourth, the descriptive condition is part of what can be communicated when downstream users make claims that use the name 'Neptune'; when, prior to telescopic contact, someone claimed that 'Neptune must be very cold,' they could be understood as committed to the claim that dthat[the planet causing the irregularities in the orbit of Uranus] must be very cold. The closeness of the link between 'Neptune' and 'the planet causing the irregularities in the orbit of Uranus' poses a puzzle for the Millian. For does the closeness of this link not show that the description serves to state the conventional rule governing 'Neptune,' and that the description is thereby the semantic content of the name?

Here ODC-Millianism provides the Millian with a principled basis for holding that the link between 'Neptune' and its associated description is non-conventional. For, on such a construal of Millianism, it follows that the description merely serves to formulate a proxy-rule that allows users of 'Neptune' to employ the name. This claim, coupled with the prosaic fact that the description 'the planet causing the irregularities in the orbit of Uranus' is *the sole cognitive grasp available* to users of 'Neptune,' then serves to explain the closeness of the link between the name and the description.[9]

The description is used to introduce the convention governing the name, and used to formulate the proxy-rules that enable speakers to follow the convention governing the name, as no other cognitive grasp is available to users of the name. The same goes for linguistic competence. Linguistic competence concerning an object-dependent, linguistic convention requires parties to

the convention to adopt proxy-rules in order to follow the convention,[10] and here only one such proxy-rule is available.

The above reasoning also serves to explain the communicative availability of the description. Provided, as will typically be the case, that it is *common knowledge* between users of 'Neptune' that the description is solely available, they can thereby infer that the thought behind an utterance of 'Neptune' involves the condition of being the planet causing the irregularities in the orbit of Uranus. This renders the description available for pragmatically facilitated communication.

It is tempting to think that, if all users have the same descriptive condition in mind when uttering a name, that this descriptive condition must therefore also be the content of the name. The Millian admits the constant conjunction between utterances of a specific name and a particular thought-content, yet remains untroubled. For it is in the nature of object-dependent linguistic conventions that there will be a sense in which, even when a name is used correctly, *thought content* and *semantic content* come apart. The thought will include the proxy-rule required to act in accord with the object-dependent convention,[11] i.e. it will contain the descriptive content operative in the dthat-clause. Such descriptive content, however, is only the speaker's way of grasping the semantic content of the name, not the semantic content of the name itself. The propositional contribution of the name remains the object, if any, that is conventionally paired with the name.

Note that much of the above phenomena will arise in all cases where a specific descriptive condition is prominently, though not universally, associated with the name. For consider the case of a person who has a single famous deed associated with their name. Most people know, of Gutenberg, only that he invented the printing press. Hence we can expect that most users of 'Gutenberg' employ the proxy-rule 'Use "Gutenberg" to speaker-refer to dthat[the inventor of the printing press]' to guide their use of 'Gutenberg.' Yet the prevalence of a single proxy-rule is compatible with the Millian view that the convention governing 'Gutenberg' pairs 'Gutenberg' with Gutenberg.

No-one is tempted to refute Millianism by arguing that 'Gutenberg' is a descriptive name where the condition of being the inventor of the printing press is semantically, i.e. conventionally, tied to it. This should serve to make the 'Neptune' case less strange, for, if we accept claims (1)-(3), then it follows that 'Neptune' is merely the limit case of a phenomenon that is already visible in the 'Gutenberg' case,[12] and similarly unproblematic.

4. NAMES THAT DO NOT SEMANTICALLY REFER

The name 'Vulcan' was introduced due to the mistaken belief that the irregularities in the orbit of Mercury were caused by a planet. ODC-Millianism provides a clear verdict as to how such cases ought to be treated. The adoption of the convention governing the name, even though it rests on a mistake, still qualifies as the adoption of an object-dependent convention consistent with the definition of such conventions in statement (1). As such a convention is object-dependent, the descriptive condition used in order to introduce and adopt such a convention should be viewed as part of a proxy-rule that allows us to partake in the convention, and not as part of the statement of the content of the convention. This implies that, in cases where the condition used to formulate the proxy-rule fails to denote an object, that the relevant convention will be partially empty. Statement (2) tells us that linguistic items contribute the contents of the conventions governing their use to the propositions in which they occur, and statement (3) tells us that, in the case of names, that such contents will be the object, if any, that the name is paired with. In this way (2) and (3) jointly imply that, as the convention is partially empty, that non-referring names do not directly contribute to the proposition expressed by the sentences in which they occur.[13] Or, alternatively phrased, that such names will fail to have a semantic value.

The above, ODC-Millian way of motivating the view that non-referring names do not have a semantic value has the same virtue as ODC-Millianism has in motivating Millianism in general.

It explains *why* such names fail to have a semantic value; such cases should be construed as cases of object-dependent conventions where the employed proxy-rule fails to identify an object. It follows, given claim (2), that such names will fail to have a semantic value. Furthermore, we can explain the closeness of the association between a non-referring name and its associated description in the same way as this was explained in the case of a name like 'Neptune.' In this way the role of the description associated with 'Vulcan' in the introduction of the name, in sustaining the convention, in facilitating pragmatically mediated communication and characterizing linguistic competence is explained without being tempted to say that the associated description states the conventional content of the name.

The above way of motivating the claim that non-referring names will fail to have a semantic value also serves to pose a puzzle for the proponent of descriptive names. For they must somehow deny one of the two claims that make up the thrust of the argument offered here. A reminder of the dialectic. In this paper we defend orthodox Millianism against those unorthodox Millian who, while treating the vast majority of names in a Millian manner, adopts a *local* descriptivism concerning names like 'Neptune' and 'Vulcan.' While the *global* descriptivist, i.e. those who hold that all names designate descriptively, would also need to resist the above argument, we will not address their possible responses to our arguments here. The global descriptivist has more resources available to challenge our arguments, but such challenges fall outside the scope of the dispute between orthodox and unorthodox Millianism.

Concerning (1), the objector may object to the very idea of an object-dependent convention. However, it would be difficult for the unorthodox Millian to reject object-dependent conventions as such. While theorists do not typically consider the nature of name-governing conventions, the unorthodox Millian does eventually owe us an account of the content of such conventions. Here the notion of an object-dependent convention provides an obvious way for the unorthodox Millian to theoretically ground their Millian commitments concerning ordinary names. In fact, unless the unorthodox Millian denies (2), they would *have* to portray most name-governing conventions as object-dependent in order to secure their Millian conclusions concerning most names.

A more natural way for the unorthodox Millian to deny (1) would be to accept that most names are governed by object-dependent conventions, but to hold that names like 'Vulcan' constitute an exception to this general rule. Here, again, it is hard to see how a principled argument for such a view would go. The unorthodox Millian needs a good reason to overthrow the presumption in favor of parity of form that motivates orthodoxy. If the unorthodox Millian accepts that ordinary names are governed by object-dependent conventions then, as we have argued above, there is no longer a good reason to deny orthodoxy for names like 'Neptune.' For there is no longer a good reason to claim that the close link between 'Neptune' and its associated descriptive condition is conventional in nature. However, if it is granted that 'Neptune' is governed by an object-dependent convention, then the unorthodox Millian can only reject orthodoxy by claiming that the convention governing 'Vulcan' is fundamentally different in kind from the convention governing 'Neptune.' But it is hard to see how a principled argument for such a view would go. The situation concerning 'Neptune' prior to telescopic contact is, in all important respects, *epistemically equivalent* to the situation prior to the discovery of the error concerning 'Vulcan.' So it becomes difficult to motivate the idea that the users of these names adopted conventions that are different in kind.

We take ourselves to have shown that ODC-Millianism has principled and plausible reasons, originating in the general theory of conventions, for holding that non-referring names do not motivate a departure from Millianism. If this is so, then the main thing that remains problematic about non-referring names is the brute intuition that they are odd. We do have some sympathy with this sentiment. Note, however, that this type of oddity is already commonly tolerated among theorists.

The oddity of saying that the name 'Vulcan' adds no content to the propositions expressed by the sentences in which it occurs consists in the way that it clashes with our intuitive assignment of contents and truth-conditions to such sentences. Here, however, the Millian who refuses to admit descriptive names is in the same boat as those who already, based on principled reasons, do not think that such intuitions settle matters of semantics. Numerous theorists (Neale [2004], Carston [2008], Bach [1994], Soames [2009], and others) have claimed, typically based on the analysis of utterances like 'Susan is ready,' that many of the sentences we utter fail to determine a complete, truth-conditional proposition. Instead the semantically expressed proposition is portrayed as 'partial' or 'gappy.' This view is held, despite the fact that ordinary speakers will readily assign truth-conditions to sentences like 'Susan is ready.' Such theorists portray the intuitive data as misleading, and claim that our intuitive attributions, at least in such cases, do not actually pertain to a semantically expressed proposition at all. Instead our intuitions, at least in such cases, are responsive to facts about the proposition the speaker intended to convey, or to facts about some pragmatically enriched proposition, etc.[14]

The Millian who holds that 'Vulcan' does not contribute a semantic value to the propositions expressed by the sentences in which it occurs is in the same boat as the non-propositionalists mentioned above, and has the same response available. While the intuitive data does suggest that typical uses of 'Vulcan' have a semantic value, theory explains why it cannot be so.

NOTES

1. The term originates in Evans 1982. Versions of the idea have been defended by Sainsbury (2000), Jeshion (2004), Reimer (2004), Kanterian (2009), and McKinsey (2016).

2. We here speak only of 'Neptune,' before telescopic contact, and 'Vulcan,' before it was discovered to not exist.

3. In equating semantic content with conventionally determined content we follow Kripke: "The notion of what words can mean, in the language, is semantical: it is given by the conventions of our language" (1977: 263).

    Kaplan is similarly explicit in stating that '[c]haracter is set by linguistic conventions' (1989: 505). Concerning Russell and convention, see Smit 2021: 278–284. For purposes of this paper we take the equivalence of semantic content and conventional content for granted.

4. Kaplan (1989: 544–546) stipulates that the denotation of dthat[the F] when taken in the context c under the assignment f with respect to the time t and the world w is the denotation of 'the F' when taken in c under f with respect to the time and world of c. Moreover, the denotation of 'the F' when taken in the context c under the assignment f with respect to the time t and the world w is the unique object of the universe that satisfies F, if there is such, and a specially designated object (e.g. the universe) that does not belong to the universe otherwise. We do not use the latter stipulation, because it is psychologically implausible. On our approach, if there is no unique object that satisfies F, then 'the F' does not denote anything.

5. Kripke, of course, pointed out that individual speakers will not always have substantive, descriptive conditions available to them that serve to uniquely identify the semantic referent of an uttered name. In fact, such conditions will sometimes be wrong, as in the 'Einstein'-case, or incomplete, as in the the 'Cicero'-case (Kripke 1980: 85–93). We do not mean to doubt Kripke's claims in this regard. Indeed, when we try to formulate the proxy-rules whereby people employ names, the possibility of such error is not a vice, but a virtue. For any theory of a speaker's grasp of the convention governing a name must allow for individual speakers to sometimes have an incorrect grasp, or only a partial grasp, of what the communal convention governing the name identifies as its semantic referent.

6. To show that this is possible in principle, we will use impossible worlds semantics, although we are not committed to it. At possible worlds the atomic formulas are assigned a truth-value and the truth-value of the complex formulas is determined by the compositional truth clauses. At impossible worlds all the formulas are directly assigned a truth-value, so their truth-value is not determined by the compositional truth clauses. (If the formulas belong to a first-order language, which contains variables, e.g. agent variables, then the semantical clause is more complex (Heylen 2013), but not in ways that change the point made here.) Suppose that in every possible world, dthat[the F] is the same object as dthat[the G]. Assume that in every intentionally accessible possible or

impossible world, 'agent *i* speaker-refers to dthat[the *F*]' is true. Suppose also that there is at least one intentionally accessible impossible world at which 'agent *i* speaker-refers to dthat[the *G*]' is false. Then agent *i* intends to speaker-refer to dthat[the *F*] but not to dthat[the *G*].

7. Even if the denotation of dthat[the *F*] is undefined, all the intentionally accessible worlds may be impossible worlds where the formula 'speaker *i* speaker-refers to dthat[the *F*]' is true.

8. The example is somewhat stylized, historically it is far from clear that Neptune was named prior to telescopic contact. In fact, the balance of evidence suggests that Neptune was only named subsequent to its verified discovery (Kollerstrom 2009). We stick with the typical construal of the example as it has become standard in the literature and as nothing of philosophical import hinges on its accuracy. Much the same goes for our use of the 'Vulcan' example.

9. If we allow for reference-borrowing, then proxy-rules that depend on *prior* users possessing the description 'the planet causing the irregularities in the orbit of Uranus' are also available.

10. Dictionaries typically define 'London' as being 'the capital of England.' This is not a definition, but rather a useful proxy-rule for using the name 'London.'

11. This implies that a belief expressed by a speaker uttering a sentence that contains the name can be reported, either by using the relevant dthat-clause, or by using the name, depending on the fine-grainedness required by the purpose of the belief-report. We would like to thank an anonymous referee for pressing us on this point, and much improving our formulation.

12. Smit (2021: 288) has argued that Russell took a multiplicity of proxy-rules for following a single convention to indicate the existence of a multiplicity of conventions. Those that found such a multiplicity implausible were thereby pushed away from descriptivism, and towards Millianism. Descriptive names, however, offer unicity of such proxy-rules, and so the intuition *contra* multiplicity by itself *will not do to resist the idea that names like 'Neptune' should be treated in a descriptive way*. Yet in treating such unicity as indicative of conventionality they still commit the same mistake as committed by the Russellian, namely to conflate the content of an object-dependent convention with the proxy-rule that a speaker uses in order to follow the convention.

13. While such a name would not directly contribute to the content of the expressed proposition, it can still affect the truth-value of the atomic propositions expressed by the sentences in which they occur, by making those atomic propositions false.

14. See Smit 2018 for an argument that our intuitions in Donnellan's misdescription cases do not track semantic reference *or* speaker's reference, but in fact track what is termed '*public* reference.'

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