Proper Names and Practices: On *Reference without Referents*[1]

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1. Introduction

If proper names are, in general, abbreviations of (bundles of) definite descriptions, one can explain the intuition that sentences with empty proper names ('Vulcan is a planet') are intelligible. Understanding a proper name consists in knowing a descriptive condition (*the planet whose existence explains the anomalies in the orbit of Mercury*), which something must satisfy to be the bearer of the name. This condition is intelligible, whether the proper name is empty or not. However, many recent semantic theories reject (versions) of the abbreviation thesis. If it is false, what does understanding a proper name consist in? People can share an understanding of a proper name, although their views about the bearer differ widely. The only common core seems to be that the different views concern the same object. Hence, shared understanding of a proper name consists in standing in causal and/or epistemic relations to the bearer of the name. This view of proper name understanding suggests that a proper name contributes only its bearer to the content of a sentence in which it occurs. As a consequence, a sentence with an empty proper name *N* is either, strictly speaking, unintelligible or *N* refers to a particular sort of abstract object (a fictional or mythical character).

Sainsbury argues in *Reference without Referents* (RWR) that one throws out the baby with the bathwater if one accepts this conclusion. *Yes*, there is no special descriptive information purporting to be about an object that one must possess in order to understand a proper name.

No, this observation does not imply that understanding a proper name is only possible if the name has a bearer. And it better should not imply this consequence. Sainsbury makes a good case for the intelligibility of empty names. To use one of his examples, on July 29 of 1878 one could read in the Boston *Daily Globe*: 'This is the day when the inhabitants of a goodly portion of the American Continent are to be favoured with the rare pleasure of an unobstructed view of Vulcan.' (quoted on p. 86) Although Vulcan does not exist, many Americans will have formed the belief that they will enjoy an unobstructed view of Vulcan and have acted accordingly. How can this be the case if 'Vulcan …' sentences have no content that can believed? It is *ad hoc* to construe the content of 'Vulcan …' as about the word 'Vulcan' or about the beliefs that people wrongly think they express with the words 'Vulcan…' (RWR, 88f).

RWR moves the debate about empty names forward by developing a semantic proposal that allows utterances with empty proper names to have a truth-value and to say something, although understanding a proper name does not consists in knowing a descriptive condition. Roughly, the correct semantics ascribe to all proper names, *whether they are empty or not,* non-descriptive reference-conditions (not referents). These conditions are sometimes met, sometimes not. Understanding consists always in knowing the reference-condition, knowing the referent is not required.

While empty proper names are the central case of 'reference without referents', the general idea is also applied to:

- pronouns which are either dependent on linguistic context ('I saw a little green man. He was quite tall') or extra-linguistic context ('Is this a dagger I see before me?') (chap. 4);

- definite descriptions, which Sainsbury classifies as complex referring terms (chap. 5);

- individual concepts in thought. (chap. 7)

In pursuing the idea that there is reference without referents, Sainsbury develops challenging ideas about fiction and the essence of reference. Lack of space prevents me from discussing everything that is worth discussing in RWR. Sainsbury's book is an important contribution to the philosophy of reference. Everyone working in the field should engage with it.

In this review essay I will focus on Sainsbury's treatment of empty proper names, individual concepts and demonstratives. The notion of a

proper name-using practice is fundamental in Sainsbury's theory of proper names. I will argue that RWR needs further work to fix metaphysical problems that arise for the individuation of proper name-using practices.

2. What we want from a theory for proper names

It should

1. distinguish co-referential proper names semantically in order to explain why true sentences like 'Hesperus = Hesperus' and 'Hesperus = Phosphorus' can differ in cognitive value.

2. allow people to 'share an understanding of a public proper name without sharing much (perhaps any) information concerning their bearers'. (RWR, 99)

3. treat empty and satisfied proper names semantically on a par.

Direct Reference Theories that identify sense and reference get 2. right, but 1. and 3. wrong.

Old school Fregeans ascribes to proper names descriptive senses, which vary from speaker to speaker. They get 1. and 3., but not 2. right.

New school Fregeans are inspired by Davidson's proposal that a theory of truth can serve as theory of sense. If one knows a theory of truth that entails for every sentence of a language L a theorem of the form 'The L-sentence *s* is true iff p' and one knows that this theory is confirmed by observations of the speech behaviour of L speakers, one can use the theory of truth as a theory of meaning (a theory of truth so usable is 'interpretative'). New School Fregeans apply this idea to proper names: one understands a proper name if one knows the axioms of an interpretative theory of truth. An *interpretative* theory of truth will have different axioms for the proper names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus':

(A1) 'Hesperus' refers in English to Hesperus.

and

(A2) 'Phosphorus' refers in English to Phosphorus.

Proper name senses are neither exhausted by the sense of definite descriptions nor by the proper name bearers. But an axiom like (A1)

can only be true if 'Hesperus' refers to something. New school Fregeans therefore get 1. and 2., but not 3. right.[2]

How can we get *true* axioms of the above type for *empty* proper names? Sainsbury proposes to use axioms of the following kind:

> (A2*) ($\forall x$) ('Phosphorus' refers in English to x iff x = Phosphorus)

Since we want to avoid the inference from (A2*) to

> ($\exists y$) ($\forall x$) ('Phosphorus' refers in English to x iff x = y),

we must use a negative free logic as the background theory of our theory of truth, according to which every atomic sentence with an empty proper name is false. Hence, the axioms for proper names, even if empty, come out as true. If Sainsbury's proposal is defensible, it gets 1., 2. and 3. right. No small feat!

3. Understanding a Proper Name by Immersing Oneself into a Practice

When does one know the reference-condition for a proper name, whether the name is empty or not? If you and I are both party to the same practice of using the name N, argues Sainsbury, we both know the reference-condition for N and therefore have a shared understanding of this proper name. (RWR, 15) The core of Sainsbury's proposal can be summed up by in the following way:

> (Practice) Speaker S knows the sense of N iff
>
> S knows that for all x, N refers to x iff x = N iff
>
> S is sufficiently induced in the practice of using N as a name for x.

Now there are many different practices of using the typographically individuated name, for example, 'Aristotle'. Sainsbury takes speakers to distinguish proper name-using practices by associated information. Which information distinguishes the practice, in which one participates, will be different on different occasions of use of the same typographically individuated name. But how does *the semanticist* distinguish proper name-using practices in his theory? He should be able to

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[2] See McDowell 1977, 172–5.

distinguish them in a context-independent way. Otherwise the theory of truth will itself be context-dependent.

(Practice) shifts the focus in the theory of proper names from modes of presentation to social entities: practices. (Practice) raises two questions:

(Q1) What is a proper name-using practice?

(Q2) How are proper name-using practices individuated?

(Q2) is the more important question: Every theory of proper names faces the question what links together numerically different uses and understandings of the same typographically individuated proper name that purport to be about one thing and what distinguishes them from other uses and understandings of the same typographically individuated name. For example, what distinguishes all uses of 'Vulcan' that purport to stand for the planet postulated by Le Verrier from all uses of 'Vulcan' for the planet mentioned in *Startrek*?

An important answer to this question is that the unifying and distinguishing factor can only be the proper name bearer. (See Strawson 1973, 52, and Evans 1982, 332ff) If this were true, one could not speak of one proper name-using practice distinguished from other such practices if the proper names used were empty. It is crucial for Sainsbury to answer this challenge.

About (Q1): A non-reductive answer to (Q1) is: A proper name-using practice is the practice of using a proper name in acts of speaker reference that purport to be about *one* and the *same* thing. The uses in a practice are supposed to have a starting point and are connected by a transmission relation. Is there a reductive answer? Sainsbury says:

> A practice can be thought of as a set of uses with a baptism, B, and containing all the uses initiated by B and by any member of the B-practice, and all the uses standing in the continuing-participation relation to any uses in the practice. (RWR, 112)

Sainsbury's careful 'can be thought of' instead of 'is the same as' is justified. If a practice were a *set* of uses of name, it would be modally fragile. A set has its member essentially, a set with different members is a different set. But, whatever proper name-using practices are, the same proper name-using practice could 'contain' different uses of the name. For example, I have used today 'London' referring to London, UK. But even if I had not used 'London' today or had used it twice and not only once, the practice of using 'London' to refer to London would

still be the practice it is. Practices don't seem to be modally fragile. Hence, we have no reductive answer to question (Q1). But although it would be nice to have such an answer, it seems not important to possess one for Sainsbury's purposes (a practice is a practice and not another thing). However, if he wants an account of proper name-using practice to validate the intuition that empty proper names have sense, he must individuate proper name-using practices without appealing to the proper name bearers, if any.

4. Proper Name-Using Practices and Baptisms

Now on to (Q2): Sainsbury proposes to individuate proper name using-practices by the events that initiate them. Each proper name-using practice has a unique starting point, a baptism in a suitably broad sense of 'baptism':

> A baptism has at most one referent. Each name-using practice involves exactly one baptism; baptisms metaphysically individuate practices, and thus fix the referent, if any, of a practice, though when we wish to know to which practice a given use of a name belongs, or what the referent of a practice is, it is rare that we can reach an answer by first identifying the baptism. Normally our evidence is associated information, even though this is evidence only, and does not make a practice the practice it is. (RWR, 106)

In a nutshell, different baptisms on the name *N* make different practices of using the typographically individuated proper name *N*; if one is inducted in different practices of using the name *N*, one knows different reference-conditions for *N*.

Now we have a new question:

(Q3) How are baptisms individuated?

Sainsbury illuminatingly discusses the success-conditions for baptisms (RWR, 113ff), but not (Q3). This is a gap in the RWR account that needs to be closed. Baptisms can only distinguish proper name-using practices in the required way if

(i) a baptism can introduce a meaningful name, although there is no object that acquires the name.

(ii) there are *unwitting* baptisms, 'events which originate a new name-using practice, even though the agent of the event had no such intention'. (RWR, 106)

(iii) baptisms distinguish proper name-using practices if, and only if, the practices make for semantic differences in understanding the introduced names.

(iv) a baptism has at most one referent. If the baptism has a referent, it is also the referent of the proper name used in the proper name-using practice.

If (i) is met, Sainsbury has answered the unification-challenge posed by Strawson and Evans: what all uses of 'Vulcan' that purport to name a planet have in common is that they can be traced back to the same baptism via a transmission relation. If (ii) is met, Sainsbury can hold that 'a referent is forever'. Whenever a name seems to change its referent, we have really an unwitting baptism. He can hold that a baptism fixes the referent of a name used in a practice and that different baptisms make for semantic differences, only if (iii) and (iv) are met. One can plausibly assume that (i) and (ii) are met. However, (iii) and (iv) seem controversial.

About (iii): There is now one practice of using the name 'Gottlob Frege' to mention the author of *Foundations of Arithmetic* by name. Let us call this practice the *'Frege'-practice*. The 'Frege'-practice was initiated by a baptism that took place in Wismar on the 11. 12. 1848. Now it is possible that the 'Frege'-practice started slightly later, say on the 12. 12. 1848. Certainly a delay of one day would not have made a difference to the practice. Or a different priest may have performed the baptism, which initiated the 'Frege'-practice. But is it possible that the same baptism has happened a day later? The worry is that baptisms are modally fragile, while practices aren't. Hence, practices cannot be individuated by baptisms.

The likely response is that proper name-using practices are also modally fragile ('the 'Frege'-practice' is a flexible designator having narrow scope with respect to modal operators). The delayed practice is not the same as the actual practice because it has different causal powers and involves different people etc. But does this way of distinguishing proper name-using practices line up in the right way with distinctions in semantic knowledge? A one-day delay in starting the practice won't have any interesting consequences for understanding the uses of the name 'Gottlob Frege'. What it takes to understand the name remains the same whether there are 15 or 5 previous uses of 'Gottlob Frege'. Hence, if we make practices like baptism modally fragile, we don't cut language at the semantic joints. We are forced to make semantic distinctions where there are none.

About (iv): Plantinga once asked:

> Can't I name all the real numbers in the interval (0,1) at once? […]
> No doubt, […] most of the purposes for which we ordinarily name
> things would be ill served by such a manoeuvre, if it possible at all.
> But these cavils are no objections. (Plantinga 1969, 253)

Indeed, what Plantinga takes to be possible is actual: *BBC News* (6.12.02)
reports a mass baptism of 3000 people in India. We can push the idea
even further. Suppose that there are three thousand people each of which
are worshipping a different god. Every god is nameless. Therefore a mass
baptism is arranged in which every god receives the name 'Peter'.

We have here one mass baptism that introduces three thousand equi-
form empty names. How can one distinguish the three thousand name-
using practices or the three thousand names used in the practices?

One cannot distinguish the three thousand names in terms of form
or pronunciation, for these are the same.

One cannot distinguish the three thousand names or practices in
terms of proper name bearers, for there are none.

One cannot distinguish the three thousand names or practices in
terms of different baptisms, for there is only one baptism, which brings
three thousand proper names into existence. Why is it only one bap-
tism? Consider an analogy: If I have the required authority, I can pro-
mote three thousand people by signing one document. One action
makes three thousand facts obtain. The same goes for baptism. There
is one illocutionary act, the baptism, that effects in the right circum-
stances the introduction of three thousand proper names.

Finally, one cannot distinguish the three thousand names in terms of
different proper name-using practices, for there are three thousand
names before there are practices of using them. The proper names are
there ready to be used when the baptism has been successful per-
formed, whether the names are used or not.

How are the three thousand empty equiform proper names then to be
distinguished? RWR has the resources to answer this question. We are able
to think about particulars *as particulars* when our mental economy con-
tains individual concepts in which we store information from the same par-
ticular. Sainsbury makes in chap. 7 a good case for the hypothesis that our
mental life has this architecture from an early age on by drawing on work
in experimental psychology. For instance, experiments suggest that young
infants are sensitive to the difference between sameness and similarity.

According to Sainsbury, there are illuminating analogies between
individual concepts (files) and proper names and other referential
terms. Individual concepts can be empty like proper names (I have an

individual concept as of a little green man before me, but there is no little green man). Just as proper names are not abbreviations of definite descriptions, individual concepts cannot be individuated in terms of the information they store. (My individual concept of you persists, although the information it holds changes over time) It is not far fetched to assume that referential devices like proper names have the cognitive role and semantic properties they have because their use is based on a cognitive architecture organised around individual concepts.

We can only count three thousand different names, if there are already three thousand different individual concepts each purporting to be of a different god. The names are distinguished by the fact that each is, metaphorically speaking, 'attached' to a different individual concept. For example, every one of our three thousand believers acquires in virtue of the baptism a new way of talking about the purported object of his individual concept.

The response to the mass baptism case is in the spirit of RWR; empty proper names come out as meaningful without being distinguished by their bearers nor by associated information. However, closer inspection of the proposal shows that central claims of RWR have been challenged. For proper name-using practices no longer play an *explanatory role* in the story. Their place is taken by dubbings and individual concepts. A baptism introduces a new intelligible name purporting to refer to x if it entitles someone to connect the name with an individual concept purporting to be about x. At bottom, proper names are intelligible because baptisms connect proper names with individual concepts in the right way. Proper name-using practices are useful to propagate the name, but they have no constitutive role for the semantics or metaphysics of names.

One can try to resist this conclusion. Sainsbury says that 'in the limiting case, [a baptism] is the only use in the practice'. (RWR, 148) This idea allows Sainsbury to keep proper name-using practices in the picture. However, imagine that you and I jointly commit us to refer with N to x. (I draw up a little agreement.) Unfortunately we never get round to honouring our commitments. We intend to refer to x, but the situation is never right or we are too lazy. In short, there is no proper name-using practice, but the shared intention to refer with N to x. Is N our proper name of x or not in this situation? Yes, it is. Is there a use of N that can be counted as a use in a proper name-using practice? Difficult, but I am inclined to say NO. A practice could get going, but doesn't. One can argue further that sharing an intention to refer to the same thing is sufficient for the existence of a meaningful public proper name. Coming to share such an intention is an autonomous way to come to know who the bearer of the name is.[3]

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[3]   On this point see RWR, 97.

5. The Individuation of Individual Concepts

We have now moved from knowledge of reference-conditions to participation in proper name-using practices, from proper name-using practices to baptisms, from baptism to individual concepts. If individual concepts are the bedrock of RWR, how are they distinguished and counted?

Individual concepts can neither be distinguished by referent (distinct individual concepts can be empty) nor by information contained (for the same individual concept may contain different information at different times). How are they individuated then? Sainsbury's answer is similar to the one for proper name-using practices:

> Empty individual concepts are all alike in being empty, but there is no danger that they all collapse into a single concept, since the identity of an individual concept is determined by the mental history of a subject. All that would be impossible would be the introduction of distinct empty individual concepts in a single mental act. Otherwise, distinctness of act provides distinctness of individual concept. (RWR, 239)

Mental acts play the same role for individual concepts as baptisms do for proper name-using practices. But when do we have one, when two mental acts? Take the following example: I have a visual experience as of two little green men sitting next to each other one a bench. In the scene before my eyes the two little green men are clearly distinguished and my attention is captured by both simultaneously. Don't we have here what Sainsbury takes to be impossible: the introduction of two distinct empty individual concepts in a single mental act? For after my perceptual experience I am able to think that he (the little green man on the right) was taller than he (the little green man on the left)

Sainsbury might explore different ways to escape the objection. Since we have only one mental act, he can try to argue that we have only one individual file of a duo. But why does this one individual file enable me to refer to two different particulars and not just to one plurality or the particulars plurally ('These little green men were interesting')?

Do we then have different mental acts in the example above? I perceptually attend to a scene that contains some individuals distinguished in this scene. Is this one mental act of perceptual attention? I can't see an independent reason to find more than one act here.

Defenders of RWR will argue that the theory itself gives one a reason to find as many mental acts here as there are singular terms introduced. However, this move to theory-independent individuation of mental acts makes the theory lose contact with the phenomena. Recent research in perceptual attention suggests that we perceptually attend to and track a small number of objects simultaneously without attending

to something more basic (locations of objects, perceptual properties).[4]
If this is true, it is cognitively plausible that one mental act can take in
several objects.

6. Demonstratives

Sainsbury's theory of proper names develops the idea that a theory of
truth can serve as a theory of meaning if it is a theory of understand-
ing. One understands the use of proper name iff one uses the right
interpretative reference-axiom in interpreting a use of the name.

Sainsbury breaks this connection in his chapters on pronouns. Nei-
ther anaphoric nor demonstrative pronouns are governed by reference-
axioms such that understanding uses of these pronouns consists in
knowing those reference-axioms. Take demonstratively used pronouns
as an example. Sainsbury correctly points out:

> Reference may be determined in ways that need not be appreciated in
> order for things to go as well as possible in interpretation. (RWR, 158)

There is this theoretical possibility, but is it an actuality for demonstra-
tives? Sainsbury proceeds as if it were. He gives therefore utterances
with demonstratively used demonstrative pronouns conditional truth-
conditions:[5]

> (D1) For all x, if a speaker utters 'That is F' thereby using 'that' to
> refer to x, the utterance is true iff x satisfies F. (RWR, 158)

(D1) abandons the search for a condition that an object has to satisfy
to be the referent of 'that' on an occasion of use and puts the fact that
the referent is determined into the truth-conditions. A consequence of
this move is that the theory of truth does no longer allow us to prove
only *interpretative* non-conditional truth conditions for 'That …' utter-
ances. Given suitable non-semantic information, one can deduce from
(D1):

> John's last utterance of 'That is F' is true iff the most beautiful
> bird in Arkansas is F.

This statement does not reveal what John said with his last utterance.

Sainsbury's response to this problem is to read off a suitable notion
of utterance meaning from the way we report demonstrative utterances.

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[4]   See Sears and Pylyshyn 2000, 2.

[5]   In this point he follows Burge 1974.

We report what is said by a demonstrative utterance by first setting the scene and then using anaphoric pronouns anchored in the scene-setting part. The demonstration that was part of the demonstrative utterance is referred to or described:

Pointing to A, she said that he$_{(A)}$ was from New York. (See RWR, 161)

The correct specification of what you said involves scene-setting in which the original demonstratum is introduced again.

Scene-setting reports can also report utterances with empty demonstratives. (RWR, 167) Macbeth, hallucinating a dagger, asks: 'Is this a dagger that I see before me […]?' One can report what he said in the scene-setting style by saying: 'Hallucinating some object, Macbeth pointed to it, and asked whether it was a dagger that he saw before himself.' The description of the act of pointing which completed Macbeth's utterance is in the scope of 'Hallucinating some object, ...' and is therefore intelligible. (The use of 'pointing' is here relaxed as the use of 'see' is relaxed in 'He was so drunk that he saw pink rats') Understanding a demonstrative remark is grasping a thought that can be specified in the scene-setting style.

There are two main problems with Sainsbury's account of demonstratives.

First, is it properly motivated? Why is the task of finding a general rule that determines the reference of a demonstrative on an occasion of use impossible? (RWR, 159) Sainsbury suggests the following answer: determining the demonstratum of a demonstrative involves the exercise of general cognitive abilities and their operation cannot be encoded in statement form. (RWR, 158) I remain unconvinced. The demonstration that accompanies a demonstrative utterance is (a) itself a sign which has meaning (you can misunderstand a demonstration) and (b) partially determines the semantic referent of the pronoun on an occasion of use. (See RWR, 156, 164) If (a) is correct, understanding a demonstrative utterance incorporates understanding a demonstration. Understanding a demonstration is not just an exercise of general cognitive abilities: there are special conventions for demonstrations and communicative intentions in play. Understanding a demonstration will consist in latching on to the right conventions and intentions. This understanding can, but perhaps need not be, spelled out further in a semantic theory. Both points taken together suggest that only the demonstrative pronoun completed by a demonstration qualifies as a singular term; the demonstrative pronoun plus demonstration is the unit of reference. It seem not impossible to me to give interpretative reference-conditions for such a unit of reference. Why, for example, can't a reference-condition like (D)

spell out our knowledge of the meaning of the English demonstrative pronoun:

> (D) 'That' completed by the demonstration δ refers in u to x iff understanding the demonstration δ puts the audience into a position to come to know that x is mentioned in u.

Second, we indeed sometimes report demonstrative utterances in the scene-setting style. But when I am asked to report what your utterance of 'He $[+\delta]$ is from New York' said, and the context of my report contains your demonstratum, I can report: 'NN said that he (pointing to A) is from New York'. Only if the demonstratum is no longer available for demonstrative reference, we switch to the scene-setting style.

There are two styles in which we can report demonstrative utterances, a context-dependent and a context-independent style. Sainsbury takes the context-dependent style to reveal what is said with a demonstrative utterance. Why not the context-dependent style?

> In interpretation, we want something relatively lasting and context-independent, something that we can recall and reuse and tell others about. (RWR, 160)

Do we? I don't think that we want *one* thing in interpretation. If you say pointing to the hungry tiger in the living room 'He has not eaten yet', the correctness of my interpretation is at least in part determined by your communicative intentions. What you want me to come to know is essentially context-dependent: he (I am now pointing to the tiger) has not eaten yet. What one wants in interpreting this utterance is relatively-lasting, reusable as long as the tiger can be demonstrated and one can tell others about it ('John said that he has not eaten yet').

Why should one not take *both* reporting styles semantically seriously? The semantic theory à la Burge and Sainsbury gives us general and context-independent semantic knowledge about the truth-conditions of demonstrative utterances. This knowledge, together with knowledge about the context, suffices for many purposes, for instance, to make clear that the speaker did not state a contradiction, what his utterance was about.

Sainsbury can reply with the following argument:[6]

> The context-independent scene-setting report is a correct report of the demonstrative utterance. Hence, the content it identifies and ascribes must be the same as in any other report.

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6   Thanks to Mark Sainsbury for clarifying this point.

Must every correct report of an utterance *u* have the same content? If I report your utterance of 'That tiger is about to pounce' in a context in which the tiger is still about to pounce by saying 'Come on! He warned you that that tiger is about to pounce', understanding my utterance has, one hopes, the same motivational powers as the utterance reported. This will not be true when I report John's utterance, still *in the same context*, by saying 'Pointing to a tiger directly before him addressing some people, John warned them that it is about to pounce'. Is that not a good reason to take the 'that' clauses of the report to name and express different contents? Or is one report incorrect? But which one of the reports; and why? These questions need further discussion to defend Sainsbury's argument.

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