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Vacuous Names In Early Analytic Philosophy: Frege, Russell, and Moore

1. Introduction: Vacuous Proper Names

The founders of analytic philosophy – Frege, Russell, Moore – engaged with problems raised by vacuous names, and their thinking on this issue informed their views, and hence *our* views, of reference and communication. By working through the arguments of these philosophers I will introduce the reader to the main philosophical questions about vacuous proper names. I will start with Frege's conception of vacuous names, move to Russell's, and end with Moore, who aimed to solve the problem that vacuous names posed for Frege and Russell.

What are *vacuous* proper names? In natural language there are type-expressions that are designated to be used as names: 'Fido' is a typical name for a dog, 'Sheba' for a cat, 'Anthony' a first name for a boy that combines with a second name to form a proper name. Kaplan (108) calls such expressions 'generic names'. As a first stab characterisation we can say that a vacuous name is a use of a generic name in which it has no referent. We need to appeal to the notion of a use of a generic name because, for instance, many people are called 'James Bond'.¹ Yet 'James Bond' also has a *use* in which it is empty. I will say more about uses of proper names as we go along. But for ease of exposition I will initially make the simplifying assumption that empty names are generic names that don't refer.

Why are vacuous names philosophically interesting? A theory of proper names should apply to non-vacuous as well as vacuous names. But vacuous proper names introduce special problems that make a unified theory difficult to achieve. As

¹ See Dummett, 'Existence', 282.

an example, consider the question ‘When is a sentence of the form ‘N is F’ true?’ (where ‘N’ is a shorthand for a name). If we ignore vacuous names, it seems plausible to say that ‘N is F’ is true if the predicate ‘is F’ applies to the bearer of ‘N’ and false, if the predicate does not apply to it. Now the sentence ‘Sherlock Holmes exists’ seems to be true and of the form ‘N is F’. But if the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ (in the use initiated by Conan Doyle) does not name anything, how can ‘Sherlock Holmes exist’ be false if we accept the account outlined? How can, in general, an assertion of an atomic sentence containing a vacuous name say something that is either true or false?

A similar problem arises for communication. By saying ‘Aristotle is a philosopher’ you might communicate something that I did not know before: by accepting what you said I can extend my knowledge about Aristotle. Now, when you say ‘Sherlock Holmes does not exist’ you may again communicate something that I did not know before. How is this possible if there is no Sherlock Holmes of whom you say something true?

2. Gottlob Frege: Sense without Reference

Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) developed his theory of sense and reference in his seminal article ‘On Sense and Reference’ (1892). He argued that ‘Hesperus is the same planet as Hesperus’ is true and uninformative, while ‘Hesperus is the same planet as Phosphorus’ is true and can extend the knowledge of someone who accepts it. The difference between these sentences consists in the fact that the names express different senses, while they refer to the same object. He glossed the main ingredient

of sense as a *mode of presentation*. An assertoric sentence expresses a thought, a complex sense. A thought is a sense for which the question of truth (falsity) arises.²

Prima facie, expressions can have sense, but no reference. Consider ‘Dr. Jekyll is no one other than Mr. Hyde’ and ‘Mr. Hyde is no one other than Mr. Hyde’. According to Stevenson’s novel, both sentences are true, but only the second can be accepted without further reason; whether it is true according to the novel is something one needs to find out. A plausible explanation for this difference is that ‘Dr. Jekyll’ and ‘Mr. Hyde’ express different modes of presentation. So there are different modes of presentation such that each present nothing, yet purport to present the same thing. Indeed Frege frequently asserted that sense is independent of reference:

[T]he object designated by a proper name seems to be quite inessential to the thought content of a sentence which contains it. (‘Einleitung in die Logik’, 208 [191].)

Consider Frege’s letter to Russell:

When we merely want to enjoy the poetry we do not care whether, e.g., the name “Ulysses” has a reference (or, as it is usually put, whether Ulysses was an historical personage). The question first acquires an interest for us when we take a scientific attitude – the moment we ask, “Is the story true?”, i.e., when we take an interest in the truth-value. *In poetry too there are thoughts, but there are only mock assertions [Scheinbehauptungen]*. This is also why a poet

² Frege ‘Der Gedanke’, 60 [292]. References to English translations in square brackets.

cannot be accused of lying if he knowingly says something false in his poetry.

(Frege, *Briefwechsel*, 235 [152]; my emphasis)

Fictional discourse is constituted by mock assertions; scientific discourse (broadly construed) by assertions. By mock-asserting ‘Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street’ Doyle expressed a thought. If Doyle only mock-asserts that Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street, he does not present the thought expressed as true. The story-teller only intends that the sentences he utters has sense; whether the thought expressed is true or its constituent senses determine referents are irrelevant for his purpose.

Frege also called vacuous proper names ‘Scheineigennamen’ (often translated as ‘mock proper name’):

Names that miss the purpose which names usually have, namely to name something, could be called Scheineigennamen. (‘Logik’, 141 [130])

‘Schein-’ is often used as a modifying expression. In one of its uses, ‘x is a Schein-F’ implies that x is not F. If ‘Scheineigennamen’ worked like this, a Scheineigennamen ‘N’ would not be a proper name.³ Frege’s terminology therefore invites an interpretation proposed by Kripke and, in part, developed by Evans:

Frege is the first author I am aware of to have emphasised that empty names in fiction, and the sentences that contain them, are pretenses. (‘Vacuous Names and Fictional Entities’, 58. Fn.)

³ Kripke ‘Vacuous Names’, 58–9.

A Scheineigenname is an expression that we pretend (in a fiction) is a proper name. So there are no vacuous proper names, there are only expressions that we pretended are proper names. Frege said that an assertoric sentence s with a Scheineigenname expresses a Scheingedanke. If we apply the reasoning we used for Scheineigenname to Scheingedanke, the result is that s does not express a thought.⁴

Kripke's interpretation may suggest a fruitful view of vacuous names in general and fictional proper names in particular. But it does not sit well with Frege's texts, and nor does his explanation of Scheineigenname suggest Kripke's reading.⁵ Something can be an F even if it 'misses the purpose' that F s usually have. The bike in my living room is still a bike although it misses its usual purpose: I just have it for decoration.⁶ Frege gives us no good reason to think that the author of a piece of fiction only pretends that, say, 'Sherlock Holmes' is a proper name and that 'Sherlock Holmes was an easy man to live with' expresses a thought. Rather, the author does not intend the thoughts he expresses to be believed.

After addressing this exegetical issue we can ask whether Frege has plausible answers to the questions about proper names raised in the introduction.

First, negative existentials and truth. An assertoric sentence with a vacuous name is neither true nor false.⁷ If 'Ulysses' is vacuous, there is nothing the concept-word 'ξ was set a shore in Ithaca' ('ξ' marks the argument-place) can be true or false of and the sentence 'Ulysses was set a shore in Ithaca' is neither true nor false; in

⁴ See Kripke 'Vacuous Names', 59 and Evans, 285-6. 'Vacuous Names' is a potboiler of Kripke's lectures that are now published as *Reference and Existence*. For critical discussion of Kripke's view see Evans, 349ff and Salmon.

⁵ See also Bell for further discussion.

⁶ See Sainsbury, *Reference without Referents*, 93.

⁷ See 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung' 32-33 [214-5], 'Logik', 141 [130].

Frege's terminology: the sentence does not refer to a truth-value. Frege took existence to be a property of concepts, namely the property of *having instances*, 'There is ...' refers to this property. If we want to deny that Apollo exists, the Fregean needs to say 'It is not the case that there is something identical with Apollo'. Since 'Apollo' is vacuous, there is nothing for the concept-word 'It is not the case that there is something identical with ξ ' to be true of and the sentence is neither true nor false. But this is highly counter-intuitive. The sentence under consideration *is* true.

Second, communication with vacuous names of natural languages. Frege wrote:

The task of vernacular languages is essentially fulfilled if people engaged in communication with one another connect the same thought, *or approximately the same thought*, with the same sentence. (Frege, *Briefwechsel*, 183 [115], my emphasis)

The task of natural languages is to enable communication, and if you and I connect the same thought with the sentence 'Aristotle liked dogs' we can communicate successfully: by uttering this sentence with assertoric force I can bring it about that you learn that Aristotle liked dogs. Why does Frege add 'or approximately the same thought' – that is, *not* the same thought?

In general, the sense of a proper name varies from speaker to speaker or from time to time. For instance, while you may think of the bearer of 'Aristotle' as the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great, I think of its bearer as the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira. But:

So long as the referent remains the same, such variations of sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science and ought not to occur in a complete language. (Frege 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung', 27 [210], Fn)

One can read this as saying that *A* can communicate successfully with *B* by uttering 'Aristotle loved dogs' only if *A* and *B* grasp modes of presentation that present *Aristotle* and predicate loving dogs of him. Referential similarity is close enough for successful communication in natural language, but not for giving proofs in Frege's concept-script.

Frege's conception of communication with sentences containing names either (a) does not allow for communication with vacuous names or (b) requires that the sense of vacuous names does not vary. As we will see, (b) is implausible. Hence, Frege is left with (a). But can one not communicate something (true) by saying 'It is not the case that there is something identical with Apollo'?

In the next sections I will discuss Russell's attempt to eliminate vacuous names. In section four we will see that the problem of communication also haunts Russell's work.

3. Meinong and Russell: Definite Descriptions and Non-Entities

The Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong (1853–1920) offered a simple answer to the question of how a negative existential statement or judgement can be true:

In order to recognize that there is no round square I must indeed make a judgement about the round square (Meinong 1904, 9)

Meinong argued that the judgement that the round square does not exist constitutes knowledge. One can only make a judgement about the round square if there is a round square. Hence, the round square needs to exist in some sense. He concluded that there are things that subsist, but fail to exist.

Russell ('On Denoting', 482–3) argued that Meinong's theory violated the law of contradiction: if the round square subsists, it is round as well as square and consequently not round. This objection does not count against the being or subsistence of Sherlock Holmes and Apollo, since they have no contradictory properties. Nonetheless one of Russell's aims was to provide a theory that does not postulate non-existing objects, yet allows sentences such as 'The round square does not exist' and 'Apollo does not exist' to be true.

Russell's strategy to achieve this aim was 'to abandon the view that the denotation is what is concerned in propositions which contain denoting phrases' (ibid, 484). Denoting phrases are expressions such as 'a man', 'some man', 'any man'. Definite descriptions are denoting phrase headed by the definite article 'the' ('the author of *Waverley*') or by expressions with the same semantic role ('*my only son*'). The denotation of a definite description is the unique object that has the properties referred to by the general terms of the definite description. The denotation of, for instance, 'the author of *Waverley*' is the person who wrote *Waverley*: Sir Walter Scott. Sentences containing definite descriptions are not *about* or do not *concern* the object that is denoted by the definite description. In part, this means that they are meaningful and can be false and, in the case of negative existentials, true, *independently of whether there is a denotation*.

Russell expounds his view of denoting phrases in general and definite descriptions in terms of meaning (ibid, 480ff). For example, a sentence such as 'The

author of *Waverley* was Scottish' means *that there was one and only one entity x which wrote *Waverley* and x was Scottish*. Hence, the sentence is true if, and only if, there was a unique author of *Waverley* and this author was Scottish; otherwise it is false. The sentence is meaningful and false independently of the existence of the denotation. Russell made this view of sentences with definite descriptions plausible by showing that it resolves three logical puzzles. The application to Meinong's 'The round square does not exist' is straightforward: The sentence means that *it is not the case that there is one and only one entity x which is round and square*; there is indeed no unique round square. So the sentence is true. Russell got the truth-value of this and similar sentences right without positing non-entities because sentences with definite descriptions do not concern the denotation of these phrases.

4. Russell and Whitehead: Vacuous and Ordinary Proper Names 'are' Definite Descriptions

Sentences that contain definite descriptions are not concerned with the denotation of the definite descriptions contained. But one can run Meinong's argument with a vacuous *proper name*: 'Apollo does not exist' is true. It can only be true if the bearer of 'Apollo' does not exist. Hence, 'Apollo' names something that subsists, but does not exist: a non-entity.

Russell tried to block this argument by arguing that 'Apollo' *is* a denoting phrase:

The whole realm of non-entities, such as "the round square", "the even prime other than 2", "Apollo," and "Hamlet" can now be satisfactorily dealt with.

All these are denoting phrases which do not denote anything. A proposition

about Apollo means what we get by substituting what the classical dictionary tells us is meant by Apollo, say “the sun-god”. All propositions in which Apollo occurs are to be interpreted by the above rule for denoting phrases. (‘On Denoting’, 491)

Neither ‘Apollo’ nor ‘Hamlet’ *are* denoting phrases, they are proper names. But ‘Apollo does not exist’ means *it is not the case that there is one and only one entity x which is a sun-god*. Given this meaning, the truth of ‘Apollo does not exist’ does not require the being of Apollo. Its truth requires only the existence of the properties mentioned in the Classical Dictionary under ‘Apollo’.⁸

Russell and Whitehead (31) interpreted uses of proper names for objects ‘known to the speaker only by report, and not by personal acquaintance’ by the rule for denoting phrases, that is, they took sentences containing such names to have meanings specifiable by the use of definite descriptions. Why? For any sentence that contains a proper name whose bearer we know only by report – I will call such proper names simply ‘ordinary proper names’ – one can suppose that there is no referent of the name. The reports that purport to impart information about a German politician going by the name ‘Otto von Bismarck’ may be false. If the sentence under consideration (‘Otto von Bismarck is a great statesman’) can be supposed to false because there is no such person as Otto von Bismarck’, ‘Otto von Bismarck’ cannot be a name (ibid, 69). For the meaning of a name is exhausted by the object it names and a sentence with a vacuous name would be neither true nor false. Hence, ‘Otto von

⁸ According to Russell’s view ‘Apollo exists’ is false (and its negation true) if, and only if, there are either several sun-gods or none. Moore (*Lectures on Philosophy*, 32) argued that the discovery of several sun-gods is not relevant for the truth of ‘Apollo exists’.

Bismarck is a great statesman' means *that there is one and only one entity x which is ... and that entity is a great statesman*. Considerations about the truth and meaningfulness of sentences with vacuous names drive Russell to interpret both vacuous and ordinary proper names according to the rule for denoting phrases.

5. Russell on Communicating about Nothing

According to Russell, there is an important difference between 'Apollo' on the one hand and 'Otto von Bismarck' on the other. There is no authority such as the classical lexicon we can consult to specify the definite description we mean when we use 'Otto von Bismarck'. Russell (*Problems of Philosophy*, 29–30) and later Moore (*Lectures*, 27, 29) took it to be an 'obvious truth' that the definite descriptions connected to proper names vary from speaker to speaker. Why? Russell (*Problems*, 30) argued that we only *know* that a definite description applies if it contains an expression referring to a particular with which the speaker is *acquainted*. One is acquainted with a particular if one is aware of it independently of knowing a truth about it. Such knowledge by acquaintance cannot be shared and therefore the knowledge that underpins the use of a proper name varies from speaker to speaker. For instance, Karl knows of Bismarck as the politician *his* father admired, Franz knew of him as the politician who gave a speech *then*. A proper name such as 'Otto von Bismarck' (even in the particular use as the name of the German politician), then, has no meaning *in English*.

Do vacuous proper names differ in this respect from ordinary proper names? Russell's remarks about 'Apollo' suggest that for some vacuous names there is a

particular set of definite descriptions that gives their meaning.⁹ Sainsbury provides a reason to take this suggestion seriously: Because there is, for example, no such person as Spiderman we cannot acquire different bodies of identifying information that are all connected to the name 'Spiderman'. There is only one designated body of information, the descriptions given in the Marvel comics, on which we all must draw when using 'Spiderman'.¹⁰

Moore opposed this idea (he uses 'exclusive description' for a uniquely instantiated *property*):

If you & I never think of Julius Caesar by the same exclusive descr., it's quite certain that the properties by which you think of Apollo won't be the same either. (*Lectures*, 30. See also *ibid.* 27)

To make Moore's point vivid, consider 'Don Juan'. When I say 'Don Juan does not exist' I will substitute 'the son of Donna Inez' for 'Don Juan', while you substitute 'the master of Leporello'. We think of the same fictional character, but draw on knowledge of different works in which he figures. Just as a real object can give rise to different bodies of identifying knowledge, the same fictional character can be developed in different works and 'its' name can be associated with different definite descriptions. Moreover, the definite descriptions that articulate the thought a speaker expresses by 'Apollo exists' will frequently *not* draw on the classical lexicon: By

⁹ See also Lewis, 267 who also suggests that a fictional proper name is 'very unlike' a non-vacuous proper name.

¹⁰ See 'Russell on Names and Communication', 96. In the footnote on the same page Sainsbury backtracks from the view proposed.

saying ‘Apollo exists’ I mean that *the God I admire most* exists. This further opens the door for variation of description in the case of mythical and fictional names.

For this reason vacuous and non-vacuous names are in the same boat: there is, in general, no privileged set of description that gives the meaning of the name. If there is no such set, the view Russell proposed is not a view of the meaning of sentences with proper names. It is a view of the ‘thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly’ (Russell, *Problems*, 29).¹¹ Such a thought, Russell holds, can only be fully specified if we replace the proper name by a definite description. For example, by asserting the sentence ‘Otto von Bismarck was a great politician’, Karl makes his belief manifest that *the man his father admired was a great politician*; by asserting the same sentence, Jeffrey voices his belief that *the man in whose honor the Bismarck herring was named* is a great politician. Karl and Jeffrey use the same words and denote the same things, but seem to talk cross-purpose. If this is so, how do we communicate with proper names?

What enables us to communicate in spite of varying descriptions we employ is that we know that there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that however we may vary the description (so long as the description is correct) the proposition described is still the same. (*Problems*, 31)

The utterer of ‘Otto von Bismarck was a great politician’ cannot expect her audience to use this sentence with the same descriptive meaning as she herself. She and her audience know that Bismarck is ‘different things to different people’. However, while speaker and audience will think thoughts specifiable by different definite descriptions,

¹¹ See Sainsbury ‘Russell on Names and Communication’, 87-88.

communication is achieved if their different definite descriptions denote the same person, the predicate attributes the same property, and both speaker and audience know that this is so.¹²

Now consider again a vacuous name like ‘Apollo’. Different people have different definite descriptions in mind when using the name; none of them denote anything. If the definite descriptions of speaker and hearer don’t denote at all, they *a fortiori* don’t denote the same thing. Hence, the enabling condition for communication is not met.

To summarize: Russell answered to the question ‘What does a vacuous name mean in an utterance by a speaker?’ by appeal to the theory of definite descriptions. His answer allowed him to classify ‘Apollo does not exist’ as true. But it motivated a view of communication that made communication with vacuous names impossible. In essence, he faced the same problem as Frege before him and, like Frege before him, he solved it.

In light of this problem, Evans and McDowell rejected the intuition that utterances with empty proper names can be understood in a sense that makes for intellectual engagement. Evans (*Varieties*, 336) argues that there are no plausible conditions for understanding utterances with empty proper names. There is only an illusion of communication and understanding of sentences containing ‘Apollo’, etc.¹³ I take this to be a last resort proposal. In the next section we will see whether Moore made any progress with this problem.

6. Moore on Thinking about the Same Imaginary Object

¹² Sainsbury (‘Russell on Names and Communication’, 91) calls this the ‘description theory of communication’ and clarifies its main points in detail.

¹³ On illusions of understanding, see Sainsbury *Reference without Referents*, 88f.

In order to apply Frege and Russell's theories of communication to vacuous names one needs an account of what it is to think 'of the same non-existent object' that neither requires non-entities nor shared definite descriptions. Moore tried to provide such an account.

So when do we think of when we say we think about 'the same imaginary object' if there is no such thing to think about? Moore (*Lectures*, 33) started with an example. A writer begins a novel by saying 'Mr Smith was going down, etc.' He pretends that we are already able to use the name and come to understand that Mr Smith was going down, etc. But:

[w]hat actually happens is merely that you're led to conceive the hypothesis that there was someone or other called Mr. Smith to whom certain things happened. (ibid.)

When do you think of the same imaginary person as the story-teller? *Prima facie*, one wants to say that the property that figures in your hypothesis that there is someone called Mr. Smith who did *P* must be similar to the property or properties that feature in the writer's hypothesis. This similarity-condition takes Frege and Russell's observation that different people think of the same thing differently on board. The author's and my hypotheses may differ. Yet there are constraints on the variation of definite description that are determined by the context and purpose of the conversation. When discussing Greek mythology, for example, the speaker as well as the hearer should conceive of hypotheses that involve properties like *being a God of music*, *a God of medicine*, etc, although they don't need to conceive of the same hypothesis.

However, while necessary, this is not a sufficient condition. When Conan Doyle wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories he conceived of a property – being an eccentric detective who lives in Baker Street 221b and goes by the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ – and entertain the hypothesis that someone had it. I might *independently conceive* of the same property and conceive of the same hypothesis. In this situation Doyle and I don’t conceive of the same fictional character, but we come up with two different, but very similar characters (*Lectures*, 29, 34).

The example suggests a further necessary condition for thinking ‘of the same imaginary object’: my conceiving of the hypothesis that someone or other is *P* *depends on your* conceiving of the hypothesis that someone or other is *P*. Moore spelled out ‘depends on’ in terms of causation. There is a common causal source of both conceivings.¹⁴

Finally, the object thought about is an imaginary object only if the causal source of the conceivings is not knowledge that there is an object that satisfies the description.

According to Moore (*Lectures*, 36), these necessary conditions are jointly sufficient for thinking of ‘the same imaginary object’. This yields a solution to the problem that vacuous names posed for Russell’s description theory of communication: ‘What enables different speakers to communicate with vacuous proper names in spite of varying descriptions they employ’ *is that they can think of ‘the same imaginary object’ when using such names*. For example, I can communicate with you by uttering ‘Apollo does not exist’ because we can both ‘think of Apollo’ and entertain thoughts to the effect that he does not exist. While this may sound

¹⁴ The idea of causation figures prominently (though under different labels) in recent work. Representative examples are Sainsbury *Reference without Referents* and Friend.

paradoxical, we can spell Moore's idea out without assuming the existence of a non-entity: when uttering 'Apollo does not exist' I intend you to conceive of a hypothesis that there is someone or other who is *P* such that this hypothesis is similar to the one I conceive when making the utterance. If your conceiving is either caused by my conceiving or our conceivings have the same causal source, I have communicated successfully to you. In virtue of my belief that it is not the case there is someone or other who is *P* you come to believe that it is not the case that there is someone or other who is *Q* where *Q* is sufficiently like my *P*. In this picture there is not *the* proposition that is communicated, but the 'unit' of communication is a set or collection of similar propositions.

Moore's picture of communication is also plausible for non-vacuous names. Imagine that two isolated hermits have given the same object, the evening star, the same (typo-graphically individuated) name, 'Venus', and even connected the same definite description with it. Do the hermits successfully communicate when they meet for the first time and one utters the sentence 'Venus is a planet'? One feels that the answer is NO. They talk past each other, but are lucky in getting the reference right. What is missing for successful communication is the right kind of dependence between their conceivings.¹⁵

Moore made progress with the problems that arose for Frege and Russell. Now, for Moore's account to be defensible causal coordination should ensure that the coordinated conceivings are 'about the same object'. But *prima facie*, there are uses of the same name that have a common cause and yet refer to different objects. There is a causal chain between uses of 'Madagascar' for Mogadishu and 'Madagascar' for

¹⁵ See Sainsbury, 'Sense without Reference', 215-6 for further discussion.

the Island on the African coast.¹⁶ Similarly, my conceiving of the hypothesis that someone or other did *P* may cause your conceiving of the same hypothesis, yet we think of different objects. I merely imagined that someone or other did *P*; you were indirectly caused by my conceiving to conceive of the same hypothesis, but you came to believe it because you came to know that there is someone who did *P*. In this situation it seems plausible to say that we don't think about the same imaginary object. For while I think about an imaginary object, you think about a real object. Mooreans need to find a more specific causal or dependence relation to support their view.

7. Moore on Fictional Names and Reference-Repugnancy

Could 'Mr. Pickwick', *in the use initiated by Dickens*, turn out to be the name of a real person? If sentences of the form 'Mr. Pickwick' in Dickens's mouth mean that there is some person or other going by the name 'Mr Pickwick' who did ..., the answer is 'Yes'. It is highly improbable, but there might be a person *x* who goes by the name 'Mr Pickwick' who had done all the things Dickens's purported to assert about Mr. Pickwick. But even in the situation described, most will agree, 'Mr. Pickwick', *in the use initiated by Dickens*, does not refer to *x*. It is just a coincidence that there is a man like the man described by Dickens.¹⁷

Why does 'Mr Pickwick' not refer to the real-life Mr Pickwick?

Dickens's propositions are all of the form "There was only one man of whom

¹⁶ See Evans, 'Causal Theory', 196.

¹⁷ See 'Imaginary Objects', 113; Kripke 'Vacuous Names', 56 and Lewis, 265 on coincidental truth.

it's true both that *I'm telling you of him and* that, etc. etc.” And *ex hypothesi* no proposition would be true about the man in question [the real man of whom everything related of Mr. Pickwick in the novel was true], since *Dickens was not telling us of him*: that is what is meant by saying that it is only “by coincidence” that there happened to be such a man. (‘Imaginary Objects’, 113)

Telling someone is speaking from knowledge (Lewis 276). Dickens does not speak from knowledge; he has no knowledge about a certain Mr. Pickwick, he only purports to have it. Hence, the author-reflexive definite description ‘the man I am telling you about ...’ does not have a real object.¹⁸

However, Moore’s appeal to an author-reflexive property is independently implausible:

First, if Dickens asserts that there was a man about whom he tells us and that his name was ‘Pickwick’ etc., he knowingly says something false. How can Moore then ensure that authors of fiction are not liars or at least deceivers? Frege’s view seems to have an advantage here, for he takes the author to only make mock-assertions.

Second, requirements for understanding fictional and non-fictional names turn out to be different:

The historian writing about Napoleon is *not* always referring to him as the man, having such and such characters, *about whom I'm telling this story*, but as *the* man, having such and such characters, who was in such and such a place

¹⁸ Currie (474ff) argues that it is not the author but the story-teller, another fictional character that purports to tell the story. On Moore’s anticipation of Lewis and Currie, see Baldwin, 186.

at such and such a time. ('Imaginary Objects', 114)

This is implausible: My understanding of the name 'Mr. Pickwick' is not impaired if I don't know whether there is a story about him or not.

Can one do better? Dummett gives an alternative account of the reference-repugnancy of fictional names that explains it in terms of the relation between the origination of the name and its later correct uses ('Existence', 282, 300). The manifest intention of the originator of the use of a proper name determines when use one uses it correctly. When it comes to a fictional name like 'Mr Pickwick' the name was introduced as the name of a fictional character and only uses of the name with the intention to conform to the author's intention are correct.¹⁹ If one uses 'Mr Pickwick' for the real person one does not use it in the way Dickens *manifestly* intended.²⁰

Dummett's proposal implies that the author must manifestly intend to use a name as a name of fictional character. The phrase 'as a name of a fictional character' cries out for further analysis. But the main problem is the *manifest* intention that is supposed to determine correct use. Compare the fictional name 'Mr Pickwick' and the hoax name 'Ern Malley', a name that purports to refer to a poet, in this respect. In the second case there is no *manifest* intention to refer to a 'fabricated' figure. It is precisely the point of the hoax that one can understand and use the name without realizing that it 'names a non-existent'. Nonetheless a particular use of 'Earn Malley' is instigated and this use the name cannot refer to a real person.

8. Conclusion

¹⁹ Dummett, 'Could there be Unicorns?' 333-4.

²⁰ Dummett, 'Existence', 300.

My aim in this paper was to articulate the problems that a theory of proper names that applies to vacuous as well as non-vacuous names must answer by drawing on the work of Frege, Russell and Moore. It turned out that the hardest problem is the possibility of communication with vacuous names. This problem will merit further investigation.²¹

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