

SUPPORT FOR INDIVIDUAL CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT. This paper aims to provide support for the view that individual concepts are basic to natural language semantics. First, the use of constant individual concepts allows us to maintain Kripke's view of proper names as nondescriptive rigid designators in the face of problems created by so-called "empty names." And second, the distinction between constant and variable individual concepts can function in an analysis of the specific-nonspecific distinction in indefinite descriptions, parallel to Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction in definite descriptions. Additionally, I respond to arguments that these distinctions are not semantic, and provide evidence that they are.

Keywords: individual concept, definite and indefinite description, semantics

1. Introduction

INDIVIDUAL CONCEPTS are functions from possible world-time points, or situations, to individuals. The notion was introduced (in a somewhat different form) by Carnap (1947), as a suitable analysis of the intensions of proper names and definite descriptions. In his "Advice on Modal Logic", Dana Scott advocated defining all properties and relations as n-tuples of individual concepts, and the thoroughly intensional grammar devised by Richard Montague and presented in "The Proper Treatment of Quantification in Ordinary English" did exactly that (although he also defined additional representations of semantic value for nonintensional properties and relations in terms of ordinary individuals). Subsequent work within the Montague Grammar framework, following Bennett (1974), eliminated the individual concept foundation of Montague's grammar as an unnecessary complication. However, more recently there have been moves to reinstitute individual concepts as denotations – cf. e.g. Aloni 2005a, 2005b; Elbourne 2005, 2008.

In this paper I want to add some support for the idea of viewing individual concepts as basic to our semantics. There are two main points that I would like to make in this effort. First, in §2 below I will argue that the use of individual concepts allows us to maintain (with Kripke, Donnellan, and others) that proper names are nondescriptorial rigid designators, while avoiding some serious problems with so-called “empty names”. And then in §3 I will argue that quantifying over individual concepts helps with the semantics of indefinite descriptions. The final section contains some concluding remarks.

Before proceeding, though, it will be useful to make a distinction between VARIABLE INDIVIDUAL CONCEPTS, which can have different values at different times and worlds (or situations), and CONSTANT INDIVIDUAL CONCEPTS which always identify the same individual.¹ Variable individual concepts are associated with ordinary definite descriptions like *the inventor of bifocals*, when they are used attributively; in this case the individual concept in question would be the one which picks out of each world whoever it is who invented bifocals in that world. Constant individual concepts correspond one-to-one with individuals and, I believe, would serve usefully as the semantic values of proper names, indexicals, and referential definite descriptions, and in the interpretation of specific indefinite descriptions.

We turn now to the first argument I want to give, involving empty names.

2. Empty Names

Before getting to the problems associated with empty names, it will be helpful to have a bit of historical background on the semantics of proper names in general.

2.1 Historical Background

Both Frege (1892) and Russell (1905, 1918) suggested that proper names have semantic values similar to those that definite descriptions have. Frege’s example was *Aristotle*, which he proposed might be equivalent to a definite description such as *the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great* (Frege 1892: 58n.). Russell used the example of *Bismarck*, which he suggested might call to mind the description *the first Chancellor of the German Empire* (Russell 1918: 171).

Kripke (1980) (following Mill 1851) argued convincingly that proper names are not semantically equivalent to definite descriptions – that they are in fact NONDESCRIPTORIAL (the term is from Salmon 1981). (Cf. also

Donnellan 1970.) In addition Kripke characterized proper names as RIGID DESIGNATORS – expressions with the same referent in every possible world.

Meanwhile Kaplan (1977, 1978) argued for the reintroduction into semantic analysis of RUSSELLIAN SINGULAR PROPOSITIONS (RSPs). These are propositions containing actual entities as constituents. While Russell had believed these to be expressible only by sentences with the demonstrative pronoun *this* (used demonstratively – cf. Russell 1918: 177 and n. 5), Kaplan argued that indexical expressions in general are used to express such propositions.

Kaplan (1977) introduced the terms DIRECT REFERENCE, and DIRECTLY REFERENTIAL, in connection with the semantics of indexicals. These terms are sometimes taken to describe simply instances of reference without the mediation of a Fregean sense – i.e. simple nondescriptionality (e.g. in Salmon 1981: 22). However Kaplan actually intended this term to imply in addition the expression of Russellian singular propositions (as he makes clear in Kaplan 1989).² On this view use of a sentence like (1) would be held to express the proposition in (2).

(1) Obama is slender.

(2) <Obama, the property of being slender>

The proposition represented in (2) has two constituents: one is the person Barack Obama, and the other is the property expressed by the predicate *is slender*. For simplicity's sake, let us refer to this type of theory as the RSP view.

It does not seem as though Kripke originally had in mind this view of proper names. As Kaplan points out, the RSP view of proper names does not leave room for worrying about the reference of a name in a possible world in which the referent does not exist, which is something that Kripke did worry about in *Naming and Necessity* (e.g. p. 21, n. 21; see also the comments of Kripke reported by Kaplan 1989: 569ff.). It is also not the approach incorporated in Montague's 1973 grammar, which does, however, treat proper names as nondescriptorial rigid designators. Instead, Montague (and at least implicitly, it seems, Kripke as well) viewed proper names as expressing constant individual concepts.³ To have something concrete to oppose to (2), it will be useful to introduce some notation. Following Montague let us use the caret, ^, to denote the intension (function from possible worlds to the denotation) of whatever it combines with. Then on the view I am supporting here, use of (1) expresses the proposition represented in (3).

(3) <^Obama, the property of being slender>

The idea is that (3) represents a proposition consisting of the constant individual concept that picks Barack Obama out of each world-time point (or situation) in which he occurs, plus the property of being slender.

Despite the backing of powerful figures such as Kripke and Montague, the constant individual concept interpretation of proper names seems to have fallen by the wayside, while the RSP approach has increased in popularity. The latter has been adopted by a number of influential figures in philosophy of language (e.g. Richard 1983, Salmon 1986, Soames 1987), and as Stuart Brock put it, “it would not be unreasonable to suggest that this view has become the new orthodoxy” (2004: 278).

I have to say I have some sympathy with Davidson’s (2000) complaint that the postulation of propositions which contain concrete physical objects is a bit mind-boggling. After all, propositions are abstract things that can be the objects of propositional attitudes (Davidson 2000: 286f). But perhaps this is just a cultural bias. I am reminded of Whorf’s description of the (Russellian!) Hopi in contrast to what he assumed were Standard Average European ways of thinking about thinking about things:

Now, when WE think of a certain actual rosebush, we do not suppose that our thought goes to that actual bush, and engages with it, like a searchlight turned upon it. What then do we suppose our consciousness *is* dealing with when we are thinking of that rosebush? Probably we think it is dealing with a ‘mental image’ which is not the rosebush but a mental surrogate of it. But why should it be NATURAL to think that our thought deals with a surrogate and not with the real rosebush? ... A Hopi would naturally suppose that his thought...traffics with the actual rosebush – or more likely, corn plant – that he is thinking about. The thought then should leave some trace of itself with the plant in the field. (Whorf 1941: 149f; italics and small caps in original.)

Unfortunately time prevents a more detailed examination of the issues Whorf raises in this passage. Instead we must turn now to the problems presented by empty names.

2.2 An Initial Look at the Problems

An empty name is a name without a bearer. Traditional examples are names of fictional, mythical, or hypothetical entities – e.g., respectively, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Medusa*, and *Vulcan* (as the name given to the planet which Le Verrier hypothesized to account for perturbations in Mercury’s orbit). Let us start with those. We need to consider the consequences of the RSP theory for sentences like those in (4).

- (4) a. Sherlock Holmes does not exist.
- b. Sherlock Holmes was a detective.

On the face of it, both of these sentences seem to be true – (4a) with respect to the actual world, and (4b) with respect to the Conan Doyle novels. In any case both also seem to be meaningful. But as we have just seen, on the currently popular RSP view the sole semantic contribution of a name to a sentence is its bearer. If a name does not have a bearer, it does not have anything to contribute to a sentence containing it. The results in this case would seem to be what have been called the “gappy” (the term is apparently Kaplan’s – cf. Almog 1991: 218, n. 15), or “structurally challenged” (Salmon 1998: 307) propositions represented in (5).

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- (5) a. < , the property of not existing>
- b. < , the property of having been a detective>

The propositions represented here are missing a constituent, and thus are not fully meaningful. Furthermore it seems at first glance as though they could not have a truth value, and thus could not be true.

2.3 Attempts at Solution

There is a voluminous literature on the difficult problems just noted. We will look at two general kinds of approaches to solution – what I’ll call the “gappy” and the “no gap” approaches.

2.3.1 Gappy. On the gappy approach, we agree that propositions expressed with empty names are missing a constituent. However, we also note that (4a) is a negative sentence. The analysis in (5a) assigns the negative element narrow scope, but that is not the only possibility. Indeed, (4a) may plausibly be read as represented in (6).

- (6) ~< , the property of existing>

In (6), unlike (5), the property of existing is being predicated of nothing, and the resulting gappy proposition is negated. If we view the negation in (6) as expressing an operator which can combine with any proposition (even a gappy one) and yield something that is true whenever its argument fails to be true, then (6) will be reckoned true.³

So far so good (though see below), but problems still remain. For one thing, we might consider (4a) (*Sherlock Holmes does not exist*) to express something different from (7).

- (7) Medusa does not exist.

However on this type of analysis both would wind up expressing (6). In Braun's (1993, 2005) view, that is OK. Our sense that the two sentences express different propositions comes from the fact that two different BELIEF STATES can have an identical proposition as content. When we contemplate (4a) we are contemplating (6) in a SherlockHolmesish way, whereas when we contemplate (7) we are contemplating (6) in a Medusaish way. But Reimer (2001) argues that Braun's analysis does not satisfactorily capture our intuition that (4a) and (7) actually have different semantic contents. Pretheoretically, she suggests, ordinary speakers would believe that someone who asserts (4a) says **of Holmes** that he does not exist, while in uttering (7) they say instead **of Medusa**, that she does not exist. Braun's analysis does not account for these intuitions.

Also, we have not yet dealt with (4b) – *Sherlock Holmes was a detective*. A number of scholars have suggested that we treat sentences like this, on the understanding which appears true, as implicitly relativized to the fictional contexts surrounding the creation of the characters.⁵ For the name *Sherlock Holmes*, that would be the context of the Conan Doyle stories. That is, we understand (4b) as though it were prefixed by something like *According to the Conan Doyle stories....* Still, we need to explain how an empty name occurring in that context can add significance. A Fregean might argue that the contexts in question are intensional and call on the senses of proper names, but on the RSP view we are considering there is no sense or intension associated with a name which can be called on to play a role in these sentences.

To these objections I want to add another. It seems to me that, despite the name, gappy propositions are not propositions. Sometimes objects with parts missing can still be correctly classified as the objects they would indubitably be with those parts, but in the cases we are considering I think too much is missing. Consider a board, for instance, which is leaning against the wall in my garage. If I were to put legs on it, it would be a table, but it does not have any legs and never has. It does not seem right to call it a "table," even a "structurally challenged table." Or consider a ring, such as my wedding ring. It only lacks filling to be correctly called a "disk", but it is not a disk, not even a gappy disk, and cannot correctly be called one. I believe those who refer to the objects represented in (5) and (6) as gappy, or structurally challenged, propositions may be misled by their terminology into accepting them as propositions. If I start calling that board in my garage a "structurally challenged table," pretty soon I may start to think of it as a table. But in this case it is important to bear in mind the lesson (sometimes attributed to Abraham Lincoln) concerning how many legs a horse has if we call a tail a leg.

2.3.2. *No gap*. Other scholars have argued that what we have been calling “empty names” are not actually empty. Instead, they denote abstract objects of one kind or another – creations of authors like Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the subjects of myths passed down through generations like Medusa, mistaken hypotheses like Le Verrier’s planet Vulcan. Salmon (1998), in a major defense of this view for at least some of the problematic names under discussion, cites Kripke (1973), van Inwagen (1977, 1983) and a number of others (Salmon 1998: 314, n. 32; cf. also Soames 2002).

With the no gap approach we do not have the problems addressed in the preceding subsection concerning the content of proposition-like objects that are missing important constituents. Instead we have some new problems: under this theory it appears sentences like (4a) and (4b), repeated below, should be false, contrary to our intuitions.

- (4) a. Sherlock Holmes does not exist.
- b. Sherlock Holmes was a detective.

Abstract mythical or fictional objects do exist (making (4a) false), but they do not have the properties that concrete objects have, like being a detective or a planet (making (4b) false as well). So the defender of the no gap view must somehow explain or explain away our intuitions that the sentences in (4) are true.

There are several lines one might take at this point. One is to argue that the names in question are actually ambiguous; along with the abstract fictional referents alluded to in the preceding paragraph we could also acknowledge referents that exist only relative to the myths, fictions, or hypotheses that introduced the names. The latter type of referent does not exist, but could have the kinds of properties attributed to such an entity. But postulation of ambiguity is almost never considered a satisfactory response to semantic problems of the type we are considering, and Salmon argues that there is no such ambiguity, and in particular no use of the latter type. “There is no literal use of ‘Sherlock Holmes’ that corresponds to ‘Holmes₁,’” where *Holmes₁* represents “an allegedly thoroughly nonreferring use that pretends to name a brilliant detective who performed such-and-such exploits” (Salmon 1998: 300). And in any case this would seem to return us to the problems of the gappy approach, at least for those meanings of the names.

An alternative is to choose instead a pragmatic route, according to which we interpret sentences like those in (4) as though the name in question had such a referent (that is, one that does not exist but (relative to the relevant fictions or myths) has the kinds of properties attributed to it), even though the name does not have a referent. On such an interpretation the sentences in (4) would be felt to be true, even though according to the semantics of

English, they are not. That is, we mistakenly take these sentences as though there were such uses of an empty name. Thus Soames remarks that “[t]he propositions asserted...by an utterance of a sentence containing an ‘empty name’ are not limited to those semantically expressed by the sentence uttered” (Soames 2002, 90). So we may construe sentences such as (4) in a way that makes them sound true, but that does not correspond to anything they actually express. (Cf. also Adams and Stecker 1994, Adams, Fuller and Stecker 1997, who adopt a similar pragmatic route within a gappy approach.) But generally speaking the pragmatic alternative has not been favorably viewed. As argued by Reimer (2001, 2007), among others, the intuitions about sentences like those in (4) seem to be just too strong to be satisfactorily explained away in this fashion.

2.4. Rigidified Descriptions

It is commonly assumed that the problems with empty names we have just been exploring are a result of the RSP theory – the inclusion of entities in propositions. Brock (2004) points out that similar problems arise for descriptonal theories of proper names that incorporate Kripkean rigidity. Brock considers two varieties of such theories. The first is one which postulates world-indexed descriptions; thus *Aristotle* might be held to express the property “the one who was **actually** the student of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great.” Such a theory runs afoul of sentences such as (8).

(8) Santa Claus might have existed.

Our intuition is that (8) is true, but on the world-indexed description view, (8) says something like “There is a possible world in which the one who **actually** lives at the North Pole and brings presents on Christmas Eve exists”. And this is not true (since no one actually lives at the North Pole and brings presents).

The other rigidified descriptonal view Brock considers is one which views the descriptions in question as always taking wide scope outside any other sentence operators. This approach also has problems with (8); on this approach (8) means something like “There is an individual who lives at the North Pole and distributes presents on Christmas Eve, and that individual might have existed,” which is obviously false.⁶

Brock notes that there is a way out for the theories we have been considering, which is to distinguish empty names from ordinary ones. Ordinary names will continue to be analyzed as nondescriptonal rigid designators – either because they are associated with a uniquely identifying description which is rigidified in one of the two ways we’ve just seen, or

because they are treated in the RSP way as contributing their referents to the propositions expressed by sentences containing them. Names of fictional or mythical or postulated entities, on the other hand, will be held to express suitable uniquely identifying properties such as those expressed by definite descriptions. If we are Russellians, then the absence of a referent is not a problem – the descriptions in question are unpacked as quantificational clauses. If we are Fregeans then there is still a problem, since the absence of a referent means that containing extensional sentences cannot have a truth value. Brock himself suggests that some kind of Meinongian abstract entity might serve as a referent, but we saw above in §2.3.2 that this approach is not without problems.

2.5. A Much Broader Problem

What has been ignored in the foregoing presentation, as in most of the literature on empty names (Salmon 1998 being a notable exception), is that there are many instances of empty names that are **not** the names of fictional or mythical or hypothetical entities, but are rather the perfectly good names of entities which happen to no longer exist – like *Sparky Anderson*, *Muriel Hauser* (the name of my mother-in-law), *Lehman Brothers*, and *The World Trade Center*. Since the referents of these names no longer exist, sentences declaring that fact, such as (9), would be subject to the same problem as *Sherlock Holmes does not exist*.

(9) The World Trade Center no longer exists.

Furthermore it would seem that on the RSP view even everyday sentences like those in (10) would be problematic.

- (10) a. The Detroit Tigers hired Sparky Anderson in 1979.
b. Muriel Hauser spent most of her life in Allen Park, MI.
c. Lehman Brothers had offices in The World Trade Center.

In each case there is at least one constituent of the sentence that has nothing to contribute to any proposition expressed by the sentence, and in (10c) there are two such. Thus on the RSP view these sentences should not be able to express complete well-formed propositions, or (on Braun's view – see n. 4 above) would be automatically false.⁷ One would expect this disability to correlate at least with a sense of anomaly, and perhaps further an inability to grasp what the sentences are trying to say and an inability to believe that what they say is true (since it is not clear that they say anything). However, of course, none of these consequences are felt.

As we have just seen, Brock concludes that the best way out for those who accept Kripke's conclusions about the nondescriptionality of proper names generally speaking, is to set the names of fictional or mythical or hypothetical entities aside and give them a descriptonal analysis. However we can hardly do that for the names of no longer existing entities like Muriel Hauser or Aristotle and still claim to be accepting Kripke's conclusions. Many of Kripke's arguments, after all, involved the names of entities who no longer existed – Moses, Aristotle, Socrates. And others involved entities who existed at the time but no longer do – like Gödel and Nixon. And yet the arguments are as convincing as they always were.

This is where constant individual concepts come in. If we assume that proper names express constant individual concepts then we have constituents of an appropriate type to serve in the propositions expressed by sentences like those above. Sentences like (9) will be true because the individual concept expressed by *The World Trade Center* is valueless in the actual world after September 11, 2001. The sentences in (10) are true because the constant individual concepts associated with the proper names in question pick out entities from the past that had the properties and relations predicated of them.

When we turn to the names of fictional, mythical, and hypothetical entities there are several possibilities. It may be the case that these also express constant individual concepts. Then some issues arise as to how the constant value is determined, given that there can be no causal contact with the entities in question (Sherlock Holmes, Santa Claus, Medusa). Of course number words show the same semantic properties as proper names, and there can be no causal contact with numbers, so perhaps lack of causal contact is no bar to a constant individual concept. (See B. Abbott 2010 for further discussion of this issue.) On the other hand there is the possibility that Brock (and others whom he cites) is correct in concluding that the names of fictional entities are in fact different from the names of once-but-no-longer existing entities. Perhaps these names are descriptonal, and the individual concepts they express are not constant but rather variable ones. In either case I would argue that we are better off than with either the gappy or the no gap solutions discussed above. And more importantly, it is clear that we do not have the massive problems that arise with no longer existing entities on the RSP approach.

2.6 Section Conclusion

In this section we have seen that serious problems arise for the RSP view of proper names – and we have looked at some of the contortions which supporters of that view have had to propose by way of trying to solve those problems. I have been arguing that viewing proper names (and other

nondescriptional expressions) as expressing constant individual concepts rather than the individuals themselves allows us to bypass these problems associated with empty names – and especially the important but frequently ignored case of names of entities which once existed but no longer do. We turn now to a somewhat different application of individual concepts – their use in the interpretation of indefinite descriptions.

3. Indefinite Descriptions

My second argument for individual concepts involves their use in the analysis of a certain specific-nonspecific distinction in indefinite descriptions. The terms “specific” and “nonspecific” are used in a variety of ways, so it will be important to be clear on the use intended here. That is the topic of the first subsection below. Following that I sketch an analysis which relies on a distinction in individual concepts; this analysis is modeled on an analysis of Donnellan’s (1966) referential-attributive distinction which was outlined by Kaplan (1978). Some important figures have argued that these kinds of distinctions (both Donnellan’s referential-attributive distinction and the specific-nonspecific distinction) are not semantic and thus should not be given a semantic analysis at all. I reply to two such lines of argument in §3.3.

3.1 The Specific-Nonspecific Distinction

The specific-nonspecific distinction I want to focus on here is one which arises in ordinary, nonintensional contexts, where the indefinite description in question is not within the scope of any kind of sentence operator such as a modal or a propositional attitude verb. The distinction has been pointed out by many people; perhaps Lauri Karttunen (1969) was the first in modern times. (Cf. also Chastain 1975, Fodor & Sag 1982.) The idea is that a sentence like (11)

(11) Mary had lunch with a logician.

could be used in either of two ways. Used nonspecifically, (11) simply reports what type of person Mary had lunch with. But used specifically (11) is intended to introduce an entity into the discourse. Other descriptions of the specific use characterize it as “referential,” and mention the speaker’s having a particular individual in mind (in this case, as the logician Mary had lunch with).

It is important to note that this distinction does not make a difference in the truth value of what is expressed in an utterance of (11). That is, (11) will

be true if and only if there is a logician with whom Mary had lunch. Nevertheless I want to argue that the distinction does make a difference in the kind of proposition expressed in an utterance of (11); the specific interpretation will involve the introduction of a constant individual concept while the nonspecific interpretation will not (or not necessarily). In the examples below we will see evidence that this specific-nonspecific distinction is indeed semantic, in the sense that it is conventionalized.⁸

Notice that in some contexts, indefinite descriptions occur unambiguously. In directives such as (12)

(12) Get me a logician!

for example, *a logician* can only be understood nonspecifically. The explanation for this lack of ambiguity is obviously pragmatic: the indefinite description by itself does not identify any particular individual. If the speaker of (12) intended it specifically, the directive would be anomalous since the addressee would not be given sufficient information to comply.

On the other hand casual speech allows disambiguation in the opposite direction, with the use of an alternative indefinite determiner, namely the non-demonstrative (and non-anaphoric) indefinite *this* determiner. That is the *this* which can occur in ordinary existential (or *there be*) sentences like (13):

(13) There was this cool logician at Mary's party last night.

(Genuine demonstratives are not felicitous in ordinary existentials of this type.) As pointed out by Prince 1981, indefinite *this* NPs can only be understood specifically, so that (14a) below, with the non-demonstrative, non-anaphoric, indefinite *this*, does not have a nonspecific interpretation. The adjective *certain* may function similarly in more formal dialects, as shown in (14b).

(14) a. Mary had lunch with this (cool) logician.
b. Mary had lunch with a certain logician.

Instead, *this/a certain logician* in (14) introduces a new discourse entity, and we expect to hear more about this person in subsequent utterances.

As we might expect from the foregoing, use of the specific indefinite *this* or a *certain* cannot occur felicitously in an imperative like those below.

(15) a. # Get me this (cool) logician!
b. # Get me a certain logician!

The fact that these utterances show anomaly indicates that the specific-nonspecific distinction is semantic (conventionalized).

3.2 Proposed Analysis

The kind of specific-nonspecific distinction we have just been looking at has obvious parallels with Donnellan's (1966) referential-attributive distinction. In "Dthat" Kaplan sketched an analysis of Donnellan's referential use in which the definite description would receive an interpretation as a constant individual concept – a function from possible worlds which yields at each world whatever it is that satisfies the description at the world of utterance. He did not pursue that line, of course – concluding that referential definite descriptions should instead be analyzed like demonstratives on his view, in the RSP type of approach we saw above. However, there is nothing to prevent us from considering constant individual concepts as a viable alternative analysis, and we have already seen evidence of the superiority of this approach when it comes to the problems associated with empty names. (Note that similar problems would arise for Kaplan's view of empty definite descriptions, on their referential use.)

In the final section of his paper, labeled "Exciting future episodes", Kaplan listed as #4 "Extending the demonstrative notion to *indefinite* descriptions to see if it is possible to so explicate the \pm specific idea. (It isn't.)" (Kaplan 1978: 241). It is clear what the problem is, given the RSP view of the referential use of definites: there is no way to identify any particular individual to be the semantic value of an indefinite.⁹ However, if we stick with individual concepts, why couldn't we distinguish the specific reading of an indefinite description from the nonspecific reading by holding that in the former use we are quantifying over constant individual concepts, and in the latter over (possibly) variable ones? So, my argument here, in brief, is this: if we accept the specific-nonspecific ambiguity of indefinite descriptions, parallel to Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction for definite descriptions, then the difference between constant and variable individual concepts can serve to interpret both distinctions in a parallel way.¹⁰

3.3 Countering Counterarguments

We have seen some evidence above in §3.1 which would lead naturally to the conclusion that the specific-nonspecific distinction in indefinite descriptions is a conventional (semantic) one. In this subsection I would like to respond to a couple of lines of argument that such a conclusion would be mistaken – that the specific-nonspecific distinction we are concerned with

here is **not** a semantic one. The first of these lines of argument comes from the parallel between Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction [for definite descriptions](#) and the specific-nonspecific distinction in indefinites. Kripke (1977) has argued that Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction is **not** a semantic one. If he is correct it would weaken our arguments for the semantic status of the specific-nonspecific distinction. The other line of argument comes from Ludlow and Neale (1991), who were reviving arguments from Russell (1919). We will consider these two lines of argument in that order.

3.3.1 Kripke's arguments. Kripke's 1977 paper "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference" is often seen as establishing conclusively that Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction is one of speaker meaning rather than linguistic meaning. If that were correct, it would be natural to propose a similar analysis for the specific-nonspecific distinction – something Kripke did indeed suggest (1977: 276, n. 40). It is important to note, however, that Kripke himself was very cautious about his conclusions, claiming only that "the considerations in Donnellan's paper, *by themselves*, do *not* refute Russell's theory" (Kripke 1977: 255, italics in original), and allowing that "it may even be the case that a true picture will resemble various aspects of Donnellan's [picture?] in important respects" (255–6).

Citing Grice's distinction between what one's words mean and what one might mean in uttering them (e.g. in Grice 1975, 1989), Kripke suggested that the content of Donnellan's referential use might in fact amount to nothing more than a proposition which a speaker may intend to convey in producing an utterance which includes a definite description, but which is not literally expressed. In so arguing Kripke (following Donnellan) assumed a view of the referential use which involved the possibility of misdescription. For example, someone uttering (16),

(16) The guy drinking a martini over there is really cute.

and intending to use *the guy drinking a martini over there* referentially to pick out a particular person, would be held by Donnellan to have said something true even if the intended referent were not drinking a martini, as long as they were really cute. But as Wilson 1991 (among others) has pointed out, similar possibilities for misdescription exist for **any** type of NP, including proper names (as noted also by Kripke himself), as well as pronouns and, most importantly, definite descriptions used **attributively**. This kind of difference between semantic content and speaker's meaning exists across the board, and is thus orthogonal to Donnellan's distinction. A number of scholars (Kaplan 1978, Wettstein 1981, Reimer 1998, among others) have in fact advocated a view of the referential use according to

which the semantic content of the definite description is entailed to hold of the referent. Thus (16) would not be true on either attributive or referential construals in the situation described.

Kripke's main argument in the 1977 paper involved several hypothetical languages, called "Russell languages," which incorporate Russell's analysis of definite descriptions. Either the language is such that Russell's analysis is stipulated to be correct for definite descriptions, or (in the strongest case) the language lacks definite descriptions altogether. Kripke argued that in such languages, speakers would use definite descriptions or their quantificational counterparts in order to convey propositions about particular individuals. Even in ordinary English, he noted, one might say, archly, *Exactly one person is drinking champagne in that corner, and I hear he is romantically linked with Jane Smith*, using a quantificational expression to communicate a proposition about a particular individual (Kripke 1977: 266). Since referential usages would arise in such a language, the fact that they occur with English definite descriptions does not show that Russell's analysis is not correct.

In response, Reimer (1998) has pointed out that the fact that definite descriptions in English are **frequently** and **standardly** used in a referential way supports Donnellan's claim of ambiguity. As she notes, it is difficult to know what more would be required to establish the claim that an expression had a particular meaning beyond the fact that it is frequently and systematically used to express that meaning. Reimer gives an analogy from language change (I'll substitute a slightly simpler example): one might argue along Kripkean lines that, e.g., *want* means only "lack" and not "desire," since in a language where it is stipulated that *want* just meant "lack," people would use it to convey propositions about desiring. Of course that is just what happened historically in English, but we would not want to conclude, given the existence of that past stage of English, that in **current** English *want* means only "lack" and not "desire." Interestingly, at the very end of his paper Kripke acknowledges such a possibility: "I find it plausible that a diachronic account of the evolution of language is likely to suggest that what was originally a mere speaker's reference may, if it becomes habitual in a community, evolve into a semantic reference" (1977: 271). Indeed, given that the definite article in English evolved from a demonstrative determiner, it is most likely that the referential use arose first and the attributive only later.

Thus it is not at all clear that Kripke has successfully shown that Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction is not semantic or conventional. Given the evidence above in §3.1 that the specific-nonspecific distinction is conventional, its parallel with Donnellan's distinction is another argument that Donnellan's distinction is as well. We turn now to arguments put forward by Ludlow and Neale.

3.3.2 *Ludlow and Neale's arguments.* Ludlow and Neale (1991) approve of Kripke's pragmatic analysis of Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction, and, noting his comment that a similar approach should apply to the specific-nonspecific distinction in indefinites, take on the job of carrying out that suggestion. Ludlow and Neale actually introduce several different conceptions of the specific interpretation of indefinite descriptions – labeled respectively “referential,” “specific,” and “definite”¹¹ – but intend to argue that “none of these uses needs to be regarded as reflecting anything semantical in nature” (172).

Early in their discussion Ludlow and Neale introduce Russell's conception of propositions expressed with referring expressions, according to which they contain actual entities. This is the RSP analysis we criticized above in §2. In so doing, they continue: “it will be convenient to follow him in this, but nothing in the present paper turns on this conception of a so-called *singular* proposition” (Ludlow and Neale 1991: 172; italics in original). However in fact, as we shall see, their arguments against recognizing a specific reading for indefinite descriptions at times rest heavily on exactly this conception of what would be expressed in that case. Thus two of Russell's (1919) arguments which they cite approvingly go as follows. Consider an utterance of (17).

(17) A man from York died last night.

Suppose first that Jones, from York, did die last night. Still, the addressee of (17) can perfectly well understand (17) without any acquaintance with Jones (or, one might add, with any other individual from York). Ludlow and Neale add: “If I had uttered ‘Jones died last night,’ the situation would be very different. ‘Jones’ is a genuine referring expression, and by Russell's Principle, it is necessary to establish the referent of ‘Jones’ in order to understand the proposition expressed” (175).

Similarly, suppose that there are no men from York at all:

Then clearly my utterance of ‘A man from York died last night’ was not about Jones or anybody else. But if ‘a man from York’ is interpreted as a referring expression then no proposition was expressed: there is no object answering to the descriptive condition and hence no object to make it into any proposition. Yet my utterance still expresses a perfectly determinate proposition. In fact the proposition expressed by my utterance is false. A proposition is expressed independently of whether the denoting phrase actually denotes. With a referring expression, however, if there is no referent then no proposition is expressed. (Ludlow and Neale 1991: 175.)

Note that if we interpret indefinite descriptions, construed specifically, using constant individual concepts, then these arguments do not go through. In uttering (17) a speaker would be expressing a general proposition in either case (that is on either the specific or the nonspecific interpretation) – the difference lying only in what kind of individual concept is involved. And the absence of any men from York would be no bar to interpreting an utterance of (17) specifically as well as nonspecifically.

It might be thought that Ludlow and Neale only use this particular conception of singular propositions in order to explain Russell's arguments. However, they admit that they intend to use Russell's strategy in their own arguments, and a bit later in the paper they make the following remark.

The claim that referential usage (as we define it) is a reflex of something semantical is nothing short of the claim that, on occasion, indefinites have the characteristic properties of genuine referring expressions. But this claim does not stand up to serious scrutiny. **Recall that a noun phrase *b* is a referring expression just in case its bearer is a constituent of the proposition expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing *b*.** (Ludlow & Neale 1991: 178, boldface added.)

It is clear from this remark that, contrary to their earlier claim that the RSP analysis is not essential to their critique, they are in effect **defining** referentiality as the production of RSP type propositions.

I should make clear that I am not arguing that indefinite descriptions are referential on their specific uses, if "referential" means that there is a particular individual which is required to have certain properties or bear certain relations if the utterance in question is to be true. On the view proposed here, indefinite descriptions on their specific use are quantificational, just as they are on the nonspecific use. Still, I am arguing, the difference is semantic, lying in what kind of individual concepts are in play – constant ones or variable ones.

Ludlow & Neale consider specific uses of example (18) (Ludlow & Neale's ex. 2 with underlining added).

(18) A convicted embezzler is flirting with your sister.

They say:

let us suppose that, contrary to *S*'s [that is, the speaker's] expectations, *H* [the hearer] is not in a position to determine who *S* has in mind.... Would *H* thereby be deprived of the possibility of grasping the proposition expressed by *S*'s utterance?

Intuition suggests not. So if the Russellian analysis is to be undermined, the semantical ambiguity theorist must present an argument to the effect that *H* would be so deprived. (Ludlow & Neale 1991: 178)

However this conclusion does not follow if the semantical ambiguity theorist is not proposing that the specific reading involves the expression of a Russellian singular proposition. In particular, on the view I am supporting here, where specific readings involve existential quantification over constant individual concepts, there is no prediction that an addressee cannot grasp such a reading without knowledge of which individual the speaker had in mind in making the assertion.

3.4 Section Conclusion

In this section we have been looking at the specific-nonspecific distinction in indefinite descriptions. We have seen some evidence that this distinction is semantic, in the sense that it is conventionally encoded. Kaplan (1977) had suggested that Donnellan's distinction could be analyzed with a distinction in individual concepts – constant individual concepts for the referential use and variable ones for the attributive use. (As noted, he abandoned the constant individual concept analysis in favor of the RSP analysis.) As Donnellan's distinction parallels the distinction in indefinite descriptions, a plausible analysis of the latter is in terms of a distinction in which kind of individual concepts are being quantified over – constant vs. variable. In support of this line I have tried to counter some arguments against the claim that Donnellan's distinction, as well as the specific-nonspecific distinction, is semantically encoded.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have tried to support the use of individual concepts in natural language interpretation by discussing two kinds of cases in which they might prove useful. We looked first at the interpretation of proper names, where the use of constant individual concepts allows us to incorporate the features of nondescriptionality and rigid designation which Kripke (1980) has so successfully argued for, without running into the serious difficulties with empty names encountered by the alternative RSP analysis. Secondly, I have argued that the use of individual concepts, and specifically the difference between constant and variable ones, can provide a suitable analysis of the difference between the specific and the nonspecific interpretation of indefinite descriptions.

NOTES

1. It should be clear that I am not assuming Lewis's (1968, 1986) counterpart view of cross-world identification, according to which no individual inhabits more than one possible world. Lewis's view clashes sharply with our intuitions concerning individuals over time, and following Kripke (1980: 15ff) I will assume that it is also not correct for variations in worlds/situations.

2. Salmon (e.g. 1998) and others use the term MILLIAN for the view that proper names contribute their bearers to the meanings of sentences containing them, but this usage is suspect. Mill held that proper names have only denotation. However he did not say that the denotation of a proper name serves also as its connotation. Braun (2005: 620, n. 2) also notes the misleadingness of the term "Millianism" for the analysis of proper names as expressing Russellian singular propositions. The constant individual concept view we are about to explore has at least an equal claim to the term.

3. I am simplifying Montague's analysis in ways not relevant to our present concerns.

4. David Braun (1993, 2005) has been a major defender of the gappy approach. He argues that even simple sentences with empty names may express gappy propositions with truth values, although those values will always be false. On Braun's view (ia) expresses the false gappy proposition in (ib).

(i) a. Medusa exists.

b. < , the property of existing >

5. Cf. e.g. Lewis 1978, Brock 2002. And cf. also H.P. Abbott 2008, ch. 12, for relevant discussion.

6. The problem just described only arises assuming, as we have been, that existence is a property. However Brock shows that even without this assumption, the wide scope version of rigidified descriptionism will have a problem very similar to the one shown here. See Brock 2004: 292.

7. Salmon (1998) appears to assume that the proposition expressed by *Socrates does not exist* is **not** a gappy proposition, despite the fact that *Socrates* currently lacks a referent. He devotes a page or so to discussing the fact that, on his analysis, the **proposition** expressed by *Socrates does not exist* does not exist (286–7), but never explains (at least as far as I can see) why this nonexistent proposition is nevertheless complete and not gappy, or structurally challenged. Certainly the meaning of *does not exist* exists now, so the only thing that would seem to be missing on the RSP view is the meaning of *Socrates*.

8. See Stalnaker 1974: 479 for clarification of two senses of "semantic" (as opposed to "pragmatic") – one involving truth conditions, and the other involving conventionalization.

9. Donnellan (1978) proposed that the specific use of indefinite descriptions involves the speaker having a particular individual in mind as the entity spoken about, where that entity would play a role in the truth conditions of such utterances. King (1988) argues convincingly against this proposal.

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10. Östen Dahl (1988) is another who has observed the similarity between Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction and the specific-nonspecific distinction in (unembedded) indefinite descriptions that we are discussing here. Dahl calls the specific reading "P-specific", where "P-" stands for "pragmatic" in the sense that truth conditions are not affected by whether the indefinite is interpreted specifically or nonspecifically. Toward the end of his paper Dahl mentions briefly a difference between "stable" and "unstable" individual concepts, which seemed to me to parallel to the difference I want to invoke here between constant and variable individual concepts. However in a personal communication, he has indicated some important differences between the two ideas.

11. I must confess to an inability to make intuitive contact with these fine-grained distinctions.

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