

## **David Braun - Empty Names**

In this paper, Braun defends the fundamental thesis in Direct Reference Theory. He argues that there are two different theories of empty names that are consistent with this theory, and one of them is more attractive than the other. He achieves his goal through the following steps:

- (1) Explain Direct Reference Theory and the basic concepts;
- (2) Address the problems that empty names raised for Direct Reference Theory;
- (3) Review the previous theories on empty names;
- (4) Discuss the two views that are consistent with Direct Reference Theory.

### **1. Theories of Direct Reference for Proper Names**

#### **1.1 The Fundamental Thesis of Direct Reference**

- A proper name has no semantic function other than referring to an individual.  
(Names only refer; they do not describe individuals)

#### **1.2 Claims beyond The Fundamental Thesis**

- Two typical examples of theories of direct reference that make claims that go beyond the Fundamental Thesis:
  - a. The semantic value (or content, or meaning) of a proper name, if it has any, is the individual to which it refers;
  - b. A sentence (or utterance of a sentence) that contains a proper name expresses a singular proposition, when it expresses any proposition at all.
- These claims do not follow directly from The Fundamental Thesis

#### **1.3 Explanation of Semantic Value and Proposition**

##### **1.3.1 Semantic Value**

- An expression's semantic value is an entity associated with the expression which is relevant to determining the semantic properties of sentences (e.g., truth conditions)
- For those who accept The Fundamental Thesis, the obvious candidate for a proper name's semantic value is its referent. (Semantic Value = Referent)

##### **1.3.2 Proposition**

- A proposition is traditionally thought to be a meaning, or semantic value, for a sentence. It contains or unifies the semantic values of the sentence's constituents, including the properties and relations to which words in a sentence refer.  
(Proposition = Meaning = Unification of Semantic Values)
- Direct Reference theorists use sequences of individuals and relations to represent the propositions:

<Bush, being-human> (“Bush is human”)

- A Direct Reference theorist may reject the additional theses in 1.2—They might think there are no propositions, or they might think appealing to propositions in semantics is useless or worse. This view is called Fundamentalism, and Braun thinks Fundamentalism is not plausible.

## 2. The Apparent Problems [1]

There are four apparent problems that empty names raise for Direct Reference Theories, namely the problems of the proposition expressed, nonsense, truth, and the proposition believed.

I think they are in close relation to each other.

### 2.1 The Problem of the Proposition Expressed

- According to Direct Reference Theory (the fundamental thesis), if a name like “Vulcan” does not refer, then it has no semantic value. This means that sentences containing non-referring empty names cannot express propositions.
- Two seemingly unacceptable conclusions:
  - a. “Vulcan” has no semantic value;
  - b. “Vulcan is a planet” and “Vulcan does not exist” fail to express propositions.

### 2.2 The Problem of Nonsense

- If a sentence fails to express a proposition, it is meaningless and therefore nonsense;
- Since sentences like “Vulcan does not exist” and “Vulcan is a planet” fail to express a proposition, the person who asserts them says nothing at all;
- Russell and Quine think that these sentences are indeed nonsense. (So these are not problems for them)

### 2.3 The Problem of Truth

- If propositions are the primary bearers of truth, then a sentence must express a proposition in order to have a truth value.
- “Vulcan does not exist” is neither true nor false. (Counterintuitive)

### 2.4 The Problem of the Proposition Believed

- A person who sincerely utters a sentence believes what he says, and what he says is a proposition;
- Suppose Fred sincerely utters “Vulcan is a planet”, according to Direct Reference Theory, this sentence lacks propositional content, and hence Fred does not express any belief when he makes this utterance. (Seems wrong)

### 3. Previous Views of Empty Names and Braun's Evaluation

#### 3.1 Meinongian View

- Hypothesizing nonexistent objects: "Vulcan" refers to a nonexistent object;
- Sentences containing it express propositions, people who assert these sentences believe propositions, and so on;
- Braun thinks that we should not hypothesize nonexistent objects to solve semantic problems.

#### 3.2 Descriptivism (Russell and Frege)

- Proper names are synonymous with definite descriptions.
- For example, "Vulcan" is synonymous with "the planet closer to the Sun than Mercury"; "Vulcan" fails to refer, because nothing satisfies this description.
- However, both the name and the description have a meaning, because the meaning of a description is (something like) a property. The property of being-the-planet-closer-to-the-Sun-than-Mercury exists, and can be a constituent of propositions, regardless of whether there is anything that satisfies it.
- Therefore, "Vulcan is hot" expresses a descriptive proposition that is straightforwardly false.
- Two counterexamples of Descriptivism (p. 454)
  - a. The misdescription counterexample
  - b. The no uniquely identifying description counterexample

#### 3.3 Metalinguistic View (Donnellan)

- Negative existentials are a special exception to Direct Reference Theory;
- Negative existentials are about words and semantical relations, not objects. In a negative existential, a name refers to itself;
- The sentence "Vulcan does not exist" expresses the same proposition as " 'Vulcan' does not refer";
- Objections:
  - a. First, on this view, the two sentences (i) "If Vulcan does not exist, then 'Vulcan' does not refer" and (ii) "If 'Vulcan' does not refer, then 'Vulcan' does not refer" should express the same proposition, but the latter expresses a necessary proposition while the former seems to express a contingent proposition;
  - b. Second, on this view, negative existentials that use different names (for instance, "London does not exist" and "Londres n'existe pas") cannot express the same proposition. This seems wrong.

#### 3.4 Metapropositional View (Kripke)

- A negative existential is a disguised way of talking about propositions rather than talking directly about objects.
- According to this view, “Vulcan does not exist” expresses the same proposition as “There is no true proposition to the effect that Vulcan exists”.
- This view raises the question of how we can refer to a proposition that doesn’t exist. The solution may be to allow higher-level propositions to contain intensional elements, but this raises further problems, including the lack of motivation for this approach and the ambiguity surrounding the nature of the intensional element.

#### 4. The No Proposition View: Beliefs

Braun thinks that there are two defensible views of empty names that are consistent with Theories of Direct Reference. The first one is the No Proposition View.

- The No Proposition View holds that “Vulcan” has no semantic value or semantic function, and sentences containing “Vulcan” fail to express propositions.
- This view has three serious problems—the problems of truth, nonsense, and the proposition believed.
- In order to solve the problem of beliefs, we must explain how it could be the case that “Vulcan is a planet” fails to express a proposition, and yet it can express the speaker’s beliefs.
- Braun argues that there are two ways in which the word “belief” is used:
  - a. A certain kind of mental state that occurs in the head; (A cognitive version of Frege?)
  - b. A proposition towards which one takes an attitude.

Braun endorses the first usage: Belief is an enduring event-like entity; it is what happens in one’s head when one believes a proposition. He states that “the content of a belief is a proposition.” (p. 457), which implies that beliefs and propositions are distinct entities.

- Therefore, it is possible for a person to have a belief that has no propositional content. A speaker could rationally utter a sentence that contains an empty name, even if this speaker knows that that sentence does not express a proposition.
- Problem with this view:

How could two different beliefs that contain different empty names be different from each other?

Response:

One could have many distinct sentence-like mental representations (beliefs) that fail to express propositions.

#### 5. The No Proposition View: Nonsense

- According to the No Proposition View, saying “Vulcan does not exist” is not nonsense;

- Braun argues that “a sufficient condition for a sentence to ‘make sense’ (not be nonsense) is that it has connections to belief states”. (459) Therefore, there are some sentences that fail to express propositions and yet make sense because of their connections to beliefs in hearers and speakers.
- Things that fail to express a belief and are thus nonsense may include: ungrammatical strings “hit bot girl the the”, nonsense sentences “all mimsy were the borogoves”;
- Since “Vulcan does not exist” can express a belief that fails to express a proposition, this sentence has connections to beliefs, so it makes sense.
- Additionally, Braun distinguishes between the ordinary sense of “nonsense” and the technical sense of “nonsense” (only the latter means ‘lacks a semantic value’)

## 6. The No Proposition View: Truth

This is the last problem we need to solve with the No Proposition View.

- Braun thinks that there are two ways to solve the problem:
  - a. Combine The No Proposition View with The No Truth Value View, which accepts that “Vulcan does not exist” is neither true nor false, but claims that a statement may implicate true propositions.
  - b. Combine The No Proposition View with The True Sentence View, which holds that the sentence “Vulcan does not exist” is true even though it fails to express a proposition. (Donnellan’s approach)
- Braun prefers the second alternative. To accept the True Sentence View, we must reject the traditional view that only propositions or objects that express propositions can be true or false. (In other words, expressing a proposition is not a necessary condition for bearing a truth value.)
- The sentence “Vulcan exists” is different from the Eiffel Tower (which is neither true nor false) because it is part of a language that people use to describe the world, and its falsity can be understood as failing in an attempt to describe the world.
- However, there are two reasons to hesitate with The True Sentence View: the only truth condition we can assign to “Vulcan does not exist” is metalinguistic, and we must deny some platitudes about truth and falsity to accept this view. (p. 460)

## 7. The Unfilled Proposition View (aka The Gappy Proposition View)

This is the second view that Braun thinks is consistent with Direct Reference Theory.

It allows sentences containing empty names to express semantic objects that (at the very least) strongly resemble propositions.

### 7.1 Structured Propositions

- A proposition reflects a sentence in two distinct ways:

- a. A proposition has a structure that reflects the syntax or grammatical structure of a sentence; (“Bush is taller than Reagan” and “Reagan is taller than Bush” have a similar propositional structure)
- b. A proposition reflects the semantic values of the words in a sentence; (Bush and Reagan occupy different positions within the structures of the propositions expressed by the two sentences above)
- This follows that a sentence has two semantical functions with respect to structured propositions:
  - a. A sentence generates a propositional structure containing positions ready to receive basic semantic values (individuals and relations);
  - b. The words in the sentence generate basic semantic values to insert into those positions.
- Therefore, there could be a propositional structure containing positions “unfilled” by either individuals or relations. **That is, a sentence might generate a propositional structure without generating basic semantic values to fill in that structure.**

## 7.2 The Unfilled Proposition View on Negative Existentials

- An empty name has no semantic value;
- A sentence containing an empty name expresses an unfilled proposition;
- Unfilled propositions have truth values. If we use ordered pairs to represent these propositions, then:
  - a.  $\langle \{\text{Bush}\}, \text{being-human} \rangle$  (“Bush is human”)
  - b.  $\langle \{\}, \text{being-a-planet} \rangle$  (“Vulcan is a planet”)
- Here is how Braun determines the truth conditions for these sentences:
 

“If P is a proposition having a single subject position and a one-place property position, then P is true iff the subject position is filled by one, and only one, object, and it exemplifies the property filling the property position. If P is not true, then it is false.” (p. 463)

Braun thinks (assumes, stipulates) that an atomic proposition is true iff the subject position of the proposition is occupied or filled by a single object that exemplifies the property in the property position. If the subject position is unfilled, the proposition is false. And the propositional negation is true iff the embedded proposition is false:

- c.  $\langle \langle \{\}, \text{being-a-planet} \rangle, \text{NEG} \rangle$  (“It is not true that Vulcan is a planet”)
- d.  $\langle \langle \{\}, \text{existence} \rangle, \text{NEG} \rangle$  (“Vulcan does not exist”)

However, the predicate/property negation of an atomic unfilled proposition is false, because the subject position has no occupant:

- e.  $\langle \{\}, \text{being-a-non-planet} \rangle$ , (“Vulcan is a non-planet”)

Therefore, a, c, and d are true; b and e are false.

(Salmon is hesitant to attribute truth value to atomic gappy propositions. Braun later criticized Salmon in 2005.)

- Distinct beliefs may have the same unfilled propositional content:
    - i. For example, “Vulcan is a planet” and “Ossian is a planet” express the same unfilled proposition on this view because both are represented by  $\langle \{ \}, \text{being-a-planet} \rangle$ . So do “Vulcan does not exist” and “Ossian does not exist” (which are both represented by  $\langle \{ \}, \text{existence} \rangle$ , NEG $\rangle$ ).
    - ii. These sentences and beliefs **differ in cognitive respects** without differing in any semantic respect.
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[1] To combine Braun’s arguments into one complete argument:

P1. A proper name has no semantic function other than referring to an individual;

P2. “Vulcan” is a proper name that does not refer;

C1. Therefore, “Vulcan” has no semantic value.

P3. A sentence containing a proper name that lacks a semantic value fails to express a proposition;

C2. Therefore, “Vulcan is a planet” and “Vulcan does not exist” fail to express propositions.

P4. If a sentence fails to express a proposition, then it is nonsense;

C3. Therefore, “Vulcan is a planet” and “Vulcan does not exist” are nonsense.

P5. If propositions are the primary bearers of truth, then a sentence must express a proposition in order to have a truth value;

C4. Therefore, “Vulcan is a planet” and “Vulcan does not exist” are neither true nor false (have no truth value)

P6. There are no beliefs that lack propositional content;

C5. Therefore, a speaker expresses no belief when they sincerely utters “Vulcan is a planet”.