On What is Concealed in Proper Names

Shinohara, Shun-ichiro
Graduate School of Letters, Kyushu University

https://doi.org/10.15017/27538

出版情報：哲学論文集. 13, pp.1-14, 1977-09-24. 九州大学哲学会
バージョン：
権利関係：

On What is Concealed in Proper Names

Shun-ichiro Shinohara

1

What is the sense of proper names? The setting of the question has been regarded as meaningful by many philosophers since Frege who first introduced the conception of the sense of proper names in Sense and Reference (Sinn und Bedeutung) in 1892. In 1843, J. S. Mill, in his A System of Logic, held that proper names do not have connotation though they do have denotation. This still seems to represent common-sense notwithstanding the Fregean new tradition. We do not ask for the meaning or sense (I use the two interchangeably.) of a proper name: What is the meaning of 'Aristotle'? It is not a defect at all that an English dictionary e. g. The Oxford English Dictionary does not contain the name. Thus there seems to be an estrangement of the sense theory from the common-sense that is at least intuitively in favour of the non-sense theory. The issue more or less involves a terminological matter about the definition of 'sense' or 'meaning'. So let us take a point on which they can probably agree: apart from proper names, descriptive words or phrases such as 'wise' 'a philosopher' and 'the teacher of Alexander' have senses. Then we might be able to bring in a verdict whether or not in this sense of

'sense' proper names have senses. We put the question now a little more concretely: 'Do proper names have descriptive power?' or 'Are they one way or another related to definite descriptions which provide them with senses?' This is where the so-called description theory sets off from, with that the present essay will primarily be concerned.

Although definite descriptions are usually found in the form 'the so-and-so' in English and they denote or stand for definite single objects, they suffer from inconsistency, as other expressions often do, in their apparent forms and actual functions. The definite description in a sentence like 'The Prime Minister may exercise his authority over the dissolution of the House of Commons.' obviously functions as an indefinite description, though with the implication of the described object's being one, meaning that whoever the Prime Minister is, he is able to dissolve the House of Commons. Some phrases not having such a standard form as the above will function contrarily like definite descriptions: 'My only daughter', 'What I am looking for', etc..

On the other hand, proper names seem rather easily identified, but for all that, some names such as 'The Times', 'The Morning Star' share the form with ordinary definite descriptions. To make matters worse, there are some proper names assumedly accommodating descriptive power, perhaps with some reservations: 'The Bank of England' and 'The United Kingdom'.

It will be a rather complicated but meaningful task to enumerate all these expressions and to sort out which category each belongs to, yet suffice it to say for the present purpose, that there are two distinct entities, proper names and definite descriptions.

2

Albeit Frege is regarded as the founder of the description theory of proper names, he seems in point of fact not to be very much interested in the relation between ordinary proper names and definite descriptions. He mentioned the relation only as a foot note in Sense and Reference: 'In the case of an actual proper name such as "Aristotle", opinions (Meinungen) as to the sense may differ. It might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great.' The passage shows that he is not willing or ready to choose a definite definite description for the proper name and leaves the choice to be a matter of opinion. Then he concluded the note: 'So long as the reference 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 perfect language (vollkommenen Sprache).' (Frege, Philosophical Writings, translated by Geach and Black, P58)

He never presented us with a concrete plan of how ordinary proper names should express their definite senses in his perfect language. Should they be replaced there by certain definite descriptions? The first half of the quotation may suggest 'yes' to the question. But if so, then we would scarcely need ordinary proper names.

As well known, proper names (Eigennamen), in his sense, are the disjunction of ordinary proper names and definite descriptions. And it is not difficult to see senses in definite descriptions and referential function in ordinary proper names. This fact, however, does not entail that he distinguished the two kinds of expressions in accordance with his fundamental distinction of referring and expressing sense, although this amalgamation of the two might be intended to allow his proper

names to have those two functions. I suspect that in his perfect language there should be no room for ordinary proper names. For they are treated in his analysis as, in effect, imperfect in that they are incapable of providing precise sense. Only definite descriptions, therefore, seems to him to play satisfactorily the rôle that he assigned.

These features of making too much of definite descriptions and failing to elucidate positively proper names or give an explicit explanation of the relation between the two have been dominating the various versions of the description theory after Frege.

In his The Philosophy of Logical Atomism of 1918, Russell held that 'the names that we commonly use, like "Socrates", are really abbreviations for descriptions,.....When we use the word "Socrates", we are really using a description. Our thought may be rendered by some such phrase as, "The Master of Plato", or "The philosopher who drank the hemlock",....., but we centainly do not use the name as a name in the proper sense of the word'. (Russell, Russell's Logical Atomism, ed. by D. Pears, 1972, P56) We can see in the passage a strong resemblance to Frege. The word 'abbreviation' was not used quite in the same sense as usually used. We may say that 'U. K.' is an abbreviation for 'The United Kingdom' or 'Q. E. D.' for 'quod erat demonstrandum.' Whether of proper names or descriptions the abbreviation should not change their original statuses but be a matter of economization. 'M. P.', if you like, may be an abbreviation for 'The Master of Plato' but 'Socrates' may not. They belong to entirely different categories.

Russell was then compelled to give the word 'proper name' a certain peculiar sense that he called 'the proper sense of the word'. In what sense is it proper? He, of course, had the answer: 'the only

words one does use as names in the logical sense are words like "this" or "that". One can use "this" as a name to stand for a particular with which one is acquainted at the moment.....It is only when you use "this" quite strictly, to stand for an actual object of sense, that is <u>really</u> a proper name'. (ibid., P56) Could this be said to be an analysis of a proper name? I think not. We shall not go any further to see how his proper names work in his whole system of logical philosophy, since we are here pursueing ordinary proper names but not <u>real</u> proper names.

These analyses of proper names by the two philosophers are the classics of the description theory. While as we have seen they did not produce positive elucidations of proper names, they did not positively deny the existence of ordinary proper names either. Whether a proper name is a disguised, abbreviated or shorthand description, as far as they compare these two kinds, they must have at least recognized the difference. Otherwise, that is, if they had completely assimilated the two or if proper names had been just neglected, the whole matter would not have arisen to them from the outset.

However, if we accept the simultaneous existence of the two, then it will follow that some sentence like 'Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander', if the sense of 'Aristotle' is taken to be the teacher of Alexander, becomes analytic. Needless to say, however, any such sentence, whatever definite descriptions we choose for the names, cannot be proved true or false only by linguistic analyses.

The consequence is so intolerable, from a logical point of view, that we are almost forced to accept the view that only complete elimination of proper names can avoid the difficulty. Then we are

back to the question all over again: What are proper names?

3

It might be wise to put the question, this time, from a different angle: Why then does a proper name not have a sense? Ask it to a man in the street. He would probably answer, 'Well, it's just a name given arbitrarily to an individual.' You may give any name, at your pleasure, to any thing in your possession such as your children, your pets, your house and so forth. This is a very important point. For since using language is a public perfomance, the arbitrariness of giving names seems to me to show their distinctive feature in language. By christening my daughter I do not enrich the vocabulary of any language. The point might be made vague by the practice that one, if English, would usually choose names from among commonplace names such as 'John', 'Susan', etc.. One is, however, free to invent new names. By doing so one does neither make any difference to one's own language nor to any language. The names of houses, as another example, like 'Raven's Croft Court' and 'Eagle Lodge' are borrowed from the English language, nevertheless they are not English phrases. And so forth.

Notice that one ought not to confuse the origins of names with the senses of them. For example, such names as 'Sophia' and 'Sussex' obviously suggest their original meanings, which, however, is not a necessary condition for them to be names.

Thus I would like to propose as the first principle that proper names should not be regarded as words within the language. And it is led from the principle that proper names themselves have no sense.

Let us see then how a proper name appears in language. I shall

give you a fresh example: 'Riei is sweet'. You do not have any idea what the sentence is about. Is Riei a newly composed chemical substance which is sweet? If so, 'Riei' is a common noun and you are learning an English word. This is in fact the proper name of an object, my daughter. If you took the sentence seriously in the first place and tried to find its meaning in a dictionary you could blame me of my unkind introduction of the sentence. I should have said something like, 'The bearer of the name "Riei" is sweet'. This is really a right start, though you may after that economize by putting the name only. Only in the case of the name being a word within the language, could we legitimately say in full, 'Riei is sweet', then you would gain a piece of knowledge. But in fact you learn here that 'Riei' is the name of an object but do not learn the meaning of 'Riei' itself.

In this sense, in general, a proper name 'N' occurring in an ordinary sentence should be regarded as the concealed description 'the bearer of "N"' that expresses a sense; this is the second principle. The straightforward occurrence of a name falsely leads us to think it is a word of language and to expect that it must have sense in its own right.

One might object: Although the form 'the bearer of "N"' pretends to have the implication of uniqueness of an object denoted by the description, the description is in fact not definite but indefinit; Many other people than that Aristotle must have the name 'Aristotle'; Having the name is common property. The objection, I think, cannot threaten the status of the description. However common the name 'John' is, you give it to your son as a unique name. So you can rightly say, 'He is proper-named "John"'. If you wished to make its

uniqueness securer, you could invent a new name. But you could never acquire the perfect uniqueness. In the name manner there must be many people in the world who are denoted by the ordinary definite description, e.g., 'the teacher of Alexander'. This all happens due to our being incapable of producing infinite number of names.

I have said so far that proper names are not part of language and should be, to be in full, replaced by the description 'the bearer of "N".' If that is the case, then what are proper names themselves? As the answer to that I would like to put the third principle that a proper name is a unique object (a mark and/or a sound) possessed by an individual. Just as people, for instance, have distinct features and fingerprints, they have different names. Alternatively supposing that we are able to distinguish thousands of colours, we could give them distinct colours instead of giving names. An important difference between names and the other forementioned objects is that the former appear in language whereas the latter do not. For names as objects are by nature borrowed from language. They are either uttered sounds or written letters, or both. In most cases the sounds and spellings of names are decided when they are given to individuals. This enables us to use names in uttered or written sentences, or rather, names are borrowed from language with this intention. On the other hand, features, fingerprints and colours raised here have nothing to do with letters, so they do not appear in sentences. Notice that the fact however does not entail that proper names are essentially part of language. But why do names as objects borrow the shapes and sounds of language? First, giving names and having names are the most able device for distinguishing individual that have them. We have or could have almost infinite number of names (marks and sounds).

Secondly by using letters names can most easily occur in sentences, with quotation marks like '"N"'. Analogically we could fill the gaps 'X' and 'Y' of the form 'the bearer of X' and 'the bearer of Y' with actual shape of a fingerprint and pigment of a colour. Alternatively the definite descriptions describing the fingerprint or the colour might be able to fill the gaps instead. But this all would be of course a troublesome business. Nothing is easier than copying names as marks in the way mentioned above.

In the second principle I suggested that proper names should be replaced by the phrase 'the bearer of "N"', This now needs a proviso. In fully explicated sentences, conforming to the principle, there only marks with inverted commas '"N"', would occur. Then this 'N' should not be subject to a replacement any more. The easiest way to describe the marks would be to use the from '"N"', though ordinary description form 'the such-and-such a shape or sound', if possible, could be substituted for '"N"', salva veritate. Thus, for example, the sentence, 'Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander' becomes 'The bearer of "Aristotle" is the teacher of the bearer of "Alexander"'. This is usually the final form and no more substitution will take place.

Now I propose the fourth principle: Only definite descriptions uniquely denote individuals. This along with the previous principles entails that proper names appeared in the form '"N"' themselves have no power, in their own right, to denote or pick up unique objects that possess them. Only 'the bearer of "N"' or something like this can do the job, as 'the teacher of Alexander', etc., can, (I do not bother to replace every occurrence of a name by 'the bearer of "N"' when not misleading.)

4

Remember that we started the present analysis with the difficulty which arose from the classic description theory: A name-containing sentence like, 'Aristotle is be teacher of Alexander', if we chose 'the teacher of Alexander' as the sense of the name, becomes analytic, notwithstanding the fact uttered by the sentence is a contingent historical fact. The solution for this is now obvious. The sentence is in full 'The bearer of "Aristotle" is the teacher of the bearer of "Alexander"', that is of course synthetic and expresses a contingent fact. The only analytic sentence about the bearer of 'Aristotle' is 'the bearer of "Aristotle" is the bearer of "Aristotle"', i.e., 'Aristotle is Aristotle', written in the usual way.

Our analysis can not only remove this difficulty but retain the virtues that the description theory possesses. Presupposing that proper names uniquely refer to objects, the existential sentences whose subjects are proper names, such as 'Cerberus does not exist' and 'Aristotle exists', become referential tautologies if they are true and referential contradictions if false. The description theory's solution for this is to replace the names by the definite descriptions that express the unique properties of the objects named. By the replacement the subjects no more refer to objects and the whole sentences are about concepts and state that at least one thing falls under such concepts or does not, in accordance with whether the existentials are affirmative or negative.

I would like to pay my respect to the basic analysis of existential sentences but not to the analysis of names the sentences contain. Before pointing out the difficulty that there are no clues what definite descriptions should replace names, we must rule out the idea of the

replacement by virtue of the first principle that proper names themselves have no sense. Our account for these sentences is clear. The sentences should be read respectively: 'The bearer of "Cerberus" does not exists' and 'The bearer of "Aristotle" exists'. Then using the device of the description theory they become 'Nothing is the bearer of "Cerberus" and 'There is the bearer of "Aristotle"'.

A basic objection to our argument may be this. By existential sentences we mean much more than just the bearers of names. When one says, e.g., 'Aristotle did not exist', it might mean that the founder of the Lyceum is not called 'Aristotle', that no one taught Alexander or something else, or more than one of these, at any rate something informative but not just that no one is the bearer of 'Aristotle'. This analysis of the sentence, I think, is totally vague. Who seriously utters, when he found one or more of these historical facts, 'Aristotle did not exist.'? Any scholar of history would say, e.g., that the founder of Lyceum had been said to be Aristotle but in fact it was someone else, etc..

Let us consider a simpler example. I mentioned earlier that my only daughter called 'Riei' was sweet. This is all the information you have of her. Now if I said 'Riei does not exist' it might mean, you think, either that I had no daughter and nothing called 'Riei', that though I had one she is not called so or that the name is that of something else, e.g., my pet. Is the existential sentence informative? I would not say it is. Only for imaginative people ambiguity means informative. Conversely if the mark 'Riei' were may fabrication for the argument, so that nothing was the bearer of it, then I should be entitled to utter the existential sentence meaning that nothing is the bearer of 'Riei'.

Things are very similar to this in the case of affirmative existentials. From a sentence like, 'Aristotle exists', we do not acquire any concrete information, yet if an object, whatever it is, is uniquely called 'Aristotle' in a given universe, then we will not lie by uttering the existential sentence meaning that something is the bearer of 'Aristotle'. However little the information is, this is the most solid part we can expect to get from existential sentences.

We know a lot about the bearer of 'Aristotle' just as we do about the Queen of England and so on, but the knowledge is neither part nor whole of the senses that the descriptions express. It is the knowledge associated with those descriptions.

The description theorists also claim that their theory gives a satisfactory account for informative identity sentences where proper names occur.

As Frege put it in Sense and Reference 'the Evening Star is the same as the Morning Star', if it were about the relation between the two names, would not be informative, because the sentence could only give us an arbitrary use of them. In fact the sentence conveys a piece of information about astronomical discoveries, so that names in general must have sense as well as references.

According to our analysis the sentence is not that of a relation between the names, but of the form, 'The bearer of "M" is the same as the bearer of "N"'. The result seems prima facie suffering from the same difficulty as above in terms of information of identities: 'the bearer of "the Evening Star" is the bearer of "the Morning Star".' gives no better information than '"the Evening Star" is "the Morning Star".'. However, although I do say, from what we have seen, that the identity is not about names but about what the definite descriptions

of our form express, I do not agree with Frege on that it is so informative as he thinks it is. His interpretation of the identity sentence presupposes here again a great deal of knowledge which is not acquired directly from the sentence. To make the sentence scientifically informative, one has to have been well informed, mainly, by means of the sentences about the facts of the planet. What we can get from the sentence itself is that two properties, i.e., having the name 'the Evening Star' and having the name 'the Morning Star' in fact belong to one and the same object.

At the end of the essay, the word 'name' itself needs be mentioned now. In ordinary use of the word it is said that a proper name names an individual or that a word which names an individual is called 'a proper name'. And when I said that a proper name is a concealed definite description 'the bearer of "N"' what I meant is that our use of a proper name has the implication of the description so that as far as the implication is kept in mind I have no objection to the use of the word 'name' mentioned above: that is, proper names with that implication name individuals. (It is not that there are two kinds, proper names and proper name–descriptions in language.) A question is then, 'Why are proper name–descriptions of the form 'the bearer of "N"' particularly called 'names', when other definite descriptions like 'the philosopher born in the Ionian city of Stagira in 384 B.C.' are not called so notwithstanding they name individuals?' (or function as proper name–descriptions do) As I said earlier proper names themselves can distinguish most ably individuals, so that name–descriptions can name or pick up most successfully individuals. People carry their names all through their lives. However, even these kind of descriptions do not perfectly name, refer or denote unique

objects. An object become named 'Aristotle' some time (however short) after he was born or he might have changed his name later on.

This leads us to a conclusion that any one or more than one infinite or definite description (including name-descriptions) cannot sufficiently pick up a certain unique object. An object appears to us as what a bundle, so to speak, of descriptions will express, but can never be reached itself.

(本学大学院修士課程中退・哲学)