NONEXISTENCE AND ABOUTNESS: THE BANDERSNATCHES OF DUBUQUE
FIRST DRAFT, COMMENTS WELCOME

S YABLO

1. INTRODUCTION

Vacuous names have been seen as a huge problem for Millian views of meaning and reference.[1] Kripke, first in a paper he describes as a dry run for his Locke Lectures, then in the (just-published) lectures themselves, tackles this problem at least as it arises for fictional names.[2] (He discusses also mythical names (*Poseidon*) and names for "failed posits" (*Vulcan*), as well as fictional common nouns (*bandersnatch*). I will mostly lump the whole lot together.) Very roughly there are four kinds of claims in which these sorts of names can occur without the disastrous results seemingly predicted:

(1) Internal: Holmes wrote a monograph on cigar ash.

(2) External: Holmes is the most famous fictional detective.

(3) Reportorial: Holmes wrote a monograph on cigar ash, according to the story.

(4) Existential: Holmes does not (and never did) exist.

The problem in each case is that you've got a claim that looks meaningful and true, but should not be either if the Millian is right about the meanings of names. A seemingly fatal combination for the Millian is **empty-name** with **evaluable-proposition**, especially **true-proposition**. Or, since names even for the Millian might occasionally be used in

non-standard ways, the fatal combination is **empty name**, **standard use**, and **evaluable proposition**.

The Millian has to show in each case why the fatal combination does not obtain. How does Kripke propose to do this? His take on the first three cases is fairly clear. But the fourth will need further discussion since the fatal combination still at least threatens. Kripke holds roughly that

(1) The claim is not true; so it doesn't matter that the name is empty.

(2) The claim is true; but the name isn't empty.

(3) The claim is true; the name though empty has a special non-standard use.

(4) The claim is true; the name is empty; the use "ought" to be standard.

To begin at the beginning. *Holmes wrote a monograph on cigar ash*, as it occurs in the story, is only pretended to be true; it is not true in actual fact.[3] The question, then, of how it manages to be true despite the emptiness of the name does not arise.

The question also does not arise with *Holmes is among the most famous literary creations ever*, although the sentence is genuinely true. For this time the name is not empty; it stands for a fictional character created by Doyle in the act of pretending to describe a detective of that name.

> A fictional character,...is an abstract entity. It exists in virtue of more concrete activities of telling stories, writing plays, writing novels, and so on, under criteria which I won't try to state precisely, but which should have their own obvious intuitive character. It is an abstract entity which exists in virtue of more concrete activities the same way that a nation is an abstract entity which exists in virtue of concrete relations between people. (Kripke [2013]., ch 3)

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[3]It is true outright if we treat the *According to the story, ...* prefix as present implicitly, but suppressed. "Taking this as a special usage, ... 'Hamlet soliloquizes' is of course true, because according to the appropriate story Hamlet does soliloquize" (Kripke [2013], ch 3)

About reportorial uses, Kripke says less than one might hope. He thinks it genuinely true that Holmes *according to the story*, wrote a monograph on cigar ash. How can it be genuinely true, in the absence of a proposition attributing the monograph to Holmes for the story to endorse? Kripke's solution appears to be that a proposition's nonexistence doesn't prevent the story from endorsing "it," if it exists according to the story.

> 'The story has it that Sherlock Holmes is a great detective.' What is it that the story has it that? There is supposed to be no such proposition as that Sherlock Holmes is a great detective which the story has it that. I said of this, ... that one should speak of a kind of proposition which is being asserted to exist and to be true. The story has it that there is a true proposition about Sherlock Holmes, namely that he is a great detective. (Kripke [2013], ch 6).

One might wonder why, if the name's emptiness makes trouble for the alleged proposition that HOLMES IS A GREAT DETECTIVE, it doesn't make trouble too for the proposition that THERE IS A TRUE PROPOSITION ABOUT HOLMES TO THE EFFECT THAT HE IS A GREAT DETECTIVE. Kripke points in reply to a difference in *how the names are used*. 'Holmes' occurs in the first sentence in a regular extensional context. But not the second; "the phrase 'about Holmes' [has] a special sort of quasi-intensional use."

2. PROPOSITIONS ABOUT HOLMES

What is Kripke's idea here? We can approach it in stages. A phrase like *proposition about Holmes* is loosely speaking an intensional transitive construction, like *memory of Vienna* or *fear of Spiderman*. Intensional transitives are marked by referential opacity—both in the substitutivity-failure and existence-neutrality senses—and the property, emphasised by Quine, of admitting both of specific and non-specific readings (wanting a sloop can be wanting relief from slooplessness).[4]

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[4]Though these features may not always go together. See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on intensional transitive verbs.

Just as fear of Spiderman involves more than fear of the referent of *Spiderman*—it is not to be confused with fear of Peter Parker—for a proposition to be about Hesperus it needs to do more than attribute properties to the referent of *Hesperus*. We want to distinguish for certain purposes propositions about Hesperus from propositions about Phosphorus, or about Venus. How and when this should be done is controversial, but Kripke is alive to the issue and discusses it in other work.[5] A proposition *about Hesperus* might be expected to incorporate, say, a preference for evening-based tracking across epistemic alternatives over morning-based tracking, where the methods come apart.[6]) Let us say, to have a word for this, that the name is used evocatively in such cases, not, or not only, referentially.

Second, the evocative aspect might be *dominant* in certain contexts. Third, there might be claims that do not draw in any serious way on the referential aspect at all, and do not "mind" if that aspect goes missing.[7] The truth-value, e.g., of *A proposition about Jack the Ripper is about a presumed killer*, does not seem to depend very much on the identity of the referent or whether indeed a referent exists. The same goes, so Kripke might say, for *A proposition about Holmes, to the effect that he is a great detective, both exists according to the stories and is true according to the stories.*

This is more than Kripke himself says about the special quasiintensional use, and more I'm sure than he'd be comfortable saying; his main comment about the special use is that it's "a little obscure to me, and perhaps to you" (Kripke [2013], ch6). A theme he does

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[5]Notably "Unrestricted exportation and some morals for the philosophy of language" in Kripke [2011a]. See also Kripke [1988]: "[H]ow essential is particular mode of fixing the reference to a correct learning of the name? If a parent, aware of the familiar identity, takes a child into the fields in the morning and says (pointing to the morning star), "That is called 'Hesperus', has the parent mistaught the language?...I need not take a definite stand, and the verdict may be different for different pairs of names" (281). The issues are related insofar as the chiild is *mis*taught by virtue of learning to use *Hesperus* to talk about Phosphorus rather than about Hesperus

[6] This need involve no departure from Millianism, for there is more than one mechanism by which plugging a coreferential name m into $C(n)$ may change the referent of the whole; the new name may induce a change in what $C(....)$ expresses, or it may toggle some parameter in the index. One common approach is to add an argument place for transworld heir lines, counterpart relations, "normal ideas", or cognitive roles. See for instance Hintikka [1962, 1970, 1996], Kaplan [1979], Stalnaker [1986], Crimmins [1989], Zimmermann [1993], Moltmann [1997], and Forbes [2000]. Quantified epistemic logic has a good deal to offer in this connection. Recent work includes Aloni et al. [2001], Holliday and Perry [2014], Yalcin [2015], Ninan [2018], Moss [2018], and Aloni [2018].

[7]Hintikka [1984], Richard [2001], Glick [2012]

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return to, however, again and again, is that his proposals in *Naming and Necessity* are directed in the first instance at non-epistemic contexts and that he regards the question of names in epistemic contexts as wide open. For instance,

> there need be no contradiction in maintaining that names are modally rigid, and satisfy a substitutivity principle for modal contexts, while denying the substitutivity principle for belief contexts. The entire apparatus elaborated in *Naming and Necessity* of the distinction between epistemic and metaphysical necessity, and of giving a meaning and fixing a reference, was meant to show, among other things, that a Millian substitutivity doctrine for modal contexts can be maintained even if such a doctrine for epistemic contexts is rejected. *Naming and Necessity* never asserted a substitutivity principle for epistemic contexts (Kripke [2011a], 158).

He thinks Fregeans have little to offer here. But although Millianism is still the way to go, he does not want to insist either that "codesignative proper names *are* interchangeable in belief contexts *salva veritate*" ((Kripke [2011a], 158). It's just that he can see no good way of *explaining* apparent substitution failures along Millian lines, which makes him unsure how to proceed. ("[W]e enter into an area where our normal practices of interpretation and attribution of belief are subjected to the greatest possible strain, perhaps to the point of breakdown" (ibid., 158).) Now, as luck would have it, philosophers are less pessimistic nowadays about treatments of (quasi-) intensionality that see names' *semantic* contribution as purely referential (footnote 6). If his special quasi-intensional use can be made intelligible, Kripke ought presumably to welcome this.

Be all that as it may, our concern in this paper is with existential statements like *Holmes does not exist*. Kripke gives the outlines of his proposal in the following passage:

> What gives us any right to talk that way [to deny that Holmes exists]?[8]

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[8]Really he is talking here not about Holmes but bandersnatches. "[T]he problem really is just as acute for predicates of a certain kind, those introduced by fictional names of species, as it is for singular terms. But people have concentrated on and worried themselves to death over the case of a singular term, because only there did they have the feeling that the object must exist, so that one can say of it that it doesn't exist."

I wish I knew exactly what to say. But the following is a stab at it. We can sometimes appear to reject a proposition, meaning that there is no true proposition of that form, without committing us to mean that what we say expresses any proposition at all. (Kripke [2011b], 71)

Thus, where reportorial claims depend for their truth-value on the existence in the story of a certain sort of true proposition about Holmes, existence claims depend for their truth-value on the *non*existence *outside* the story of another sort of true proposition about Holmes. Call this the NO TRUE PROPOSITION account of nonexistence claims. It says of existence-statements like *Holmes exists* that

NTP: The truth of ¬*Holmes exists* may reflect only that there are no true propositions about Holmes to the effect that he does exist.[9]

Reasons for dissatisfaction with this will be considered in a moment. That Kripke is not himself thrilled with his suggestion is apparent from the summation that comes immediately after.

He begins by ticking off results reached about internal, external, and reportorial statements. For instance, "questions of the existence of fictional characters, and other fictional objects, are empirical questions like any other, and sometimes have affirmative or negative answers" (Kripke [2011b], 72). Eventually we are left with "a residue of questions that appear to involve genuinely empty names and real assertions of nonexistence" (ibid.). Rather than restating for us his position on nonexistence claims, he remarks simply that "These have just been discussed."

(Kripke [2013], ch6). He sees the issues raised by empty names and kind-ish general terms as roughly the same and I will follow him in this.

[9]The set of worlds where there is a true proposition to the effect that Holmes exists is related to what Stalnaker calls the diagonal proposition expressed by *Holmes exists*. (Both authors want their propositions not be seen as metalinguistic.)

3. TAKING A STAB

Why does Kripke say he is only taking a stab at the nonexistence problem? And why is he not happier with the stab he takes? I can think of several possible reasons. The first he raises in connection with common rather than proper nouns, but the point seems general. "How can the statement that unicorns exist not really express a proposition, given that it is false?" Kripke seems to be suggesting here a kind of supervenience or dependence principle:

DEP: A sentence's truth-value depends on what it says, the proposition it expresses.

Given (DEP), there is something worrisome about assigning a truth-value in the absence of a proposition, indeed in recognition of the proposition's absence.

> [A] certain sentence about bandersnatches seems to have a truth-value, but this does not mean that sentences containing 'bandersnatch' express ordinary propositions. And this I regard as a very substantial problem (Kripke [2011b], 65)

Second, one has to explain both why *Holmes does not exist* seems true, and why *Holmes exists* seems false. (NTP) as written accounts at best for the first. [10]

A third worry is overgeneration. There is no true proposition either to the effect that Holmes *fails* to exist, or to the effect that he has a certain blood type. But we are not in the same way tempted to deny that he fails to exist, or has that blood type.

Fourth, we want a *unitary* account—not, one for empty names, another for full. If *Pegasus doesn't exist* says that there is no true proposition of a Pegasus sort, *Trump doesn't exist* should say the same of Trump-type propositions. Whereas surely it says of Trump himself that there is no such person.

Fifth, consider the metalinguistic account, which takes the cash-value of *Holmes does not exist* to be that there is no object of a certain sort, viz referred to by 'Holmes.' Kripke rejects this account. To hypothesize counterfactually that Socrates does or doesn't exist is NOT to

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[10]Unless one wants to maintain that we first call ¬*S* true, and then reckon *S* false to maintain consistency.

hypothesize that the name has or lacks a referent; he could exist with another name, or no name at all. A similar problem might be thought to arise with the no-proposition theory. To hypothesize counterfactually that Socrates does or doesn't exist is not to hypothesize that a certain sort of proposition exists. He could exist without the proposition, and the proposition could perhaps exist without him.

4. COUNTING AS FALSE

Now, some of these objections are directed at a view Kripke doesn't perhaps maintain. Kripke does not say that *Holmes exists* is false in the strict sense of having a false proposition as its literal content. Kripke allows that we may in rejecting the sentence be finding it false in an *extended* sense that involves the falsity of some other, related, proposition, that is not the literal content.

> It is natural, extending our usage, so to speak, to use 'There are no bander-snatches' to say 'There is no true proposition that there are bandersnatches (in the Arctic, or even on the whole earth).' (Kripke [2013], ch6)

Here it seems the felt falsity of 'There are bandersnatches' reflects the genuine falsity, not of the proposition that there are bandersnatches, but the higher-order proposition that among the truths is a proposition of the sort just alluded to.

CAF: *S* may count for us as false not because "the proposition that *S*" is false, but due to the falsity of a proposition suitably related to *S*.

Let's pursue this idea a little in its own terms, bracketing for the moment Kripke's specific proposal about what the suitably related proposition is, that it's a higher-order proposition about the nonexistence of other propositions. For there is at least a *kind* of case where (CAF) seems enormously plausible.

Suppose that there is no such thing as *the* proposition expressed by *S*. *S*'s expressive ambitions are to that extent not fully realized; ambitions that aren't fully realized might still, however, be partly realized. If a sentence said *something* false, that would seem to

explain its intuitive falsity, and depending on our other views might even suffice to *make* it false. Rather than *S* owing its false appearance to its not expressing a truth, as in (NTP), perhaps the problem is its expressing inter alia a falsehood.

SFP: An unevaluable *S* that succeeds in saying *something* will count as false, if the something is false; the negation will strike us as true.

This should for several reasons be attractive to Kripke. First, it respects supervenience. The sentence's falsity, or seeming falsity, does derive from *a* proposition it expresses, just one not describable as "the" proposition that Holmes exists.[11]

Second, Kripke says himself that *S*'s potential for *falsity* in particular does not require a full-fledged proposition that *S*.[12] (SFP) agrees; there is no such thing as the proposition that *S*. It expresses if you like a *partly*-fledged proposition with potential only for falsity, not truth.

Third, the idea of a "bad" sentence evaluated on the basis of *something* it says is not unknown to Kripke. He relies in his work on truth on the Strong Kleene valuation scheme. *P&Q* is false on Strong Kleene if either conjunct is false; this condition may be met even if the other conjunct expresses no proposition. *Snow is black & This conjunct is false* says *in part* that snow is black, and that is enough to make it false, even if the Liar sentence doesn't succeed in saying anything.

Fourth, the idea of a defective sentence evaluated on the basis of something it says is *also* not unknown to him qua theorist of reference. He alludes to it in remarks on Strawson at the same 1973 conference where he gave "Vacuous Names" (Kripke et al. [1973]). There is no such thing for Strawson as the proposition expressed by a King-of-France sentence. But we do often find such sentences evaluable. *The King of France is bald & the Queen of England is bald* has a falsehood-expressing conjunct right on its surface. (SFP) tries in a

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[11]Or, if we allow propositions with gaps in them where an object should go, not one describable as the proposition that Holmes in particular exists.
[12]"It is not sufficient just to be able to say that it is false, [if there is to be a proposition] one has to be able to say under what circumstances it would have been true, if any" (Kripke [2011a], 68).

way to generalize this to "deep" conjuncts, aspects of a sentence's overall commitments that do not appear on the surface. Strawson suggests a number of examples, for instance, *The lodger next door offered me twice that sum!*, when there is no lodger next door, and *I had breakfast with the King of France this morning*. Here is Kripke's example:

> Where someone puts this question in a form like 'Is the present king of France bald?' the informant may be puzzled and not say 'No'. But if you put it to him categorically, say first specifying an armament program to make it relevant and then saying 'The present king of France will invade us', the guy is going to say 'No!', right? [13]

The 'No!' is licensed by (SFP) on the assumption that 'The present king of France will invade us' says in part that *a* French king will invade us.[14] The sentence misdescribes *something* and that is enough.[15]

Granted, 'the present king of France' is a description. And our problem is to do in the first instance, with *names*. Does Kripke ever suggest that an empty-*name* claim seems false because it misdescribes something that's really there? He comes close:

> Without being sure of whether Sherlock Holmes was a person,... we can say 'none of the people in this room is Sherlock Holmes, for all are born too late, and so on'; or 'whatever bandersnatches may be, certainly there are none in Dubuque.' (Kripke [2011b], 71-2).

Holmes is here in this room seems false, because what it says about this room really is false. Likewise *Holmes is in NY State*, etc. If we keep going in this way, eventually we reach *Holmes is in the universe*, which seems pretty close to *Holmes exists*. Alternatively let "US," or if you prefer "EVERYTHING," be you and me and all the other existing things. It is a

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[13]"A Strawsonian might say "[T]he 'No!' is a rejection of the statement as having a false presupposition"....a Russellian might say "You're hesitant to give a verdict when a presupposition isn't fulfilled, even though you know it's false." Either man has some class of cases to explain" (Kripke et al. [1973], 479)

[14]Whether it does literally say this, inter alia as it were, may depend on one's theory of content-part (Yablo [2017]).

[15]For more on the evaluability in certain cases of sentences containing empty definite descriptions see Lasersohn [1993], von Fintel [2004], Yablo [2006], Schoubye [2009], Jandrić [2014], and Felka [2015a].

fact about US, one might think, that Holmes is not of that happy number. *Holmes exists* seems false, perhaps, because it misdescribes US.

5. TOPIC AND WHAT IS SAID

This idea of *S* counting as false because it "misdescribes something" is tantalizing, but a little obscure. Before we start charging *S* with describing *X* incorrectly, one should ask whether *S* takes descriptive aim at *X* in the first place. Linguists distinguish a sentence's "topic"—what it purports to describe—from its "focus" or "comment"—the information it purports to give about the topic. (Theme vs rheme is another distinction in this neighborhood.) Strawson took the view that a KoF sentence is especially likely to strike us as false if we can find another topic for it than the king of France— like US in *The KoF will invade us*.

Suppose we call a notion semantic if it bears or can bear on truth-conditions. Then topic is a semantic notion. *I only breathe when I'm meditating* can go from true to false, for instance, as the topic shifts from *breathe* to *meditating*.

But if topic is semantic in its effects, it is or can be pragmatic in its causes. A sentence's topic depends in many cases on the discourse context, for instance on the question under discussion when it is produced. *I only breathe when I'm meditating* is about meditating, uttered in response to *What do you when meditating*? It says of meditation-time that nothing but breathing is done then. Uttered however in response to *When do you breathe?* it says of breathing that it is not done at other times.[16] This according to Strawson is why *The king of France is bald* sounds false in response to *Who are some bald notables?*[17] Its topic in the aftermath of that question is the bald notables, which group it misdescribes as including a French king.

Two things follow. First, the notion of "what *S* says" in (SFP) will have to be topic-sensitive, and so discourse-sensitive. Why does *The king of France is bald* count as false

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[16]Rooth [1999]

[17]Strawson [1964]. Felka [2015b] develops Strawson's idea and defends it against objections from von Fintel.

when its topic is the bald notables? Because it is only then that the sentence says in part that that group includes a French king. Second, an utterance of *S* in such and such a context may say in part that *X* is *F*, even if *S* considered in isolation does not mention *X* (as *The king of France is bald* does not mention the bald notables).

Take again *Holmes exists*. It is a fact about EVERYTHING, we suggested, that Holmes is not of that number. Of course, it is not clear as yet what kind of fact this would be, given that there is no such individual. The point for now is that an utterance of *Holmes exists* may be about EVERYTHING, even if the sentence considered in isolation does not mention this group. If *The king of France is bald* can count as false by virtue of what it says about the bald notables, when the extent of that group is the issue under discussion, why should not *Holmes exists* count as false by virtue of what it says about EVERYTHING, when the extent of that somewhat larger group is the issue under discussion?[18]

The worry, again, is that whatever it is that *Holmes exists* says about EVERYTHING will presumably have to derive somehow from the meaning of *Holmes*; and there is no more to the meaning of *Holmes* than that it's an empty name. How much of a problem this presents depends on what the datum is that we are trying to explain. If the datum is simply that *Holmes exists* is properly counted false in discussions of what there is, then the name's emptiness may be enough. What after all is the claim *Holmes exists* makes about EVERYTHING? It says that at least one of us has a certain feature: that of identity with Holmes ($\lambda x \; x = Holmes$). And nothing *can* have that feature, given just that the name is empty. For **o** to satisfy $\lambda x \; x = Holmes$, we would need a **p** such that **o** was identical to **p**, and **p** was the referent of *Holmes*.[19] And there is no such **o**, simply because there is no such **p**.

[18]See Atlas [1988] for the idea that the expression in subject position is rarely topical, by the usual tests, in existence claims. As the exception that proves the rule, he points to cases like *Well, they're not dead; they do exist; they're just not here right now.*

[19]Stalnaker [1977]

6. DISTINCTIVE INFORMATION

So much concerns just the falsity of the claim made by *Holmes exists* when the topic is existence, or what exists. But falsity is not the only data-point that needs explaining. To learn that Holmes doesn't exist gives us one sort of information about EVERYTHING. To learn that Vulcan doesn't tells us something quite different. *Holmes exists* thus apparently misdescribes EVERYTHING in one way, while *Vulcan exists* misdescribes it in another. This suggests that, even if the falsity of *Holmes exists* can be arranged on the basis of the name's lack of a referent, at least when the topic is not Holmes, to understand the intuitive information content of such claims we will need to look further.

Suppose with the Millian that *Holmes* and *Vulcan* are semantically indistinguishable; their contribution to content is exhausted in each case by the failure to provide an object. How then is it that *Holmes exists* and *Vulcan exists* appear to make different false claims, and their negations appear to provide us with different information? In the case at least of Vulcan, one is tempted to say that the information content derives from an associated reference-fixing description. To learn that Vulcan doesn't exist might be to learn that no planet explains certain perturbations in the orbit or Mercury. More generally,

(1) Suppose the reference of *n* is fixed by *the F*.

(2) Then we know a priori that *n if it exists is an F (and nothing else is F)*.

(3) *n exists* thus a priori implies that *Something is F*.

(4) To learn *n doesn't exist* is to learn that some such implication is false.

This deals with the "different information" problem insofar as *m exists* will a priori imply different falsehoods than *n exists*, on account of a difference in reference-fixing descriptions.

But what are we to make of the second premise? It is not clear even for Kripke how *n if it exists is an F* can be known, never mind a priori, when there is no such proposition in the first place. If we are bothered about *n exists* when the name is empty, we ought to be bothered as well about *If n exists, then......*

Kripke might reply that that the conditional is *not* known, a priori or otherwise, unless the name refers. If that is right, then the proposed model of distinctive information collapses. But a second, related model might be possible. Call *S* conditionally a priori if either we know the proposition it expresses a priori, or else it fails to express a proposition.

(1) Suppose the reference of *n* is fixed by *the F*.

(2) Then *n if it exists is an F* is conditionally a priori.

(3) *n exists* thus a priori implies, if it expresses a proposition, that *Something is F*.

(4) To "learn" *n does not exist* is to learn that some such would-be implication is false.

Note that one thing we can conclude from the would-be implication's falsity is that *n exists* fails to express a truth. This would be too metalinguistic for Kripke's tastes, but it is otherwise not far from his actual suggestion about the cash-value of *n does not exist*, namely, there is no true proposition *about Holmes* (special intensional use alert) to the effect that he exists. This model unfortunately has most of the problems noted above: overgeneration, for instance (there is no true proposition either to the effect that Holmes does not exist, but we don't reject his nonexistence!).

The problem was to see how *n if it exists is an F* could be a priori if it fails to express a proposition. Another kind of response focuses on the sentential operator *It is a priori that S*. Perhaps *S* does not simply contribute here the proposition expressed. It is supposed to be a priori, after all, that Hesperus = Hesperus, but not that Phosphorus = Hesperus; that Neptune explains certain planetary motions, but not that *it* does (pointing at Neptune). As Kripke says in "Puzzle About Belief,"

> *Naming and Necessity* may even perhaps be taken as suggesting, for some contexts where a conventional description rigidly fixes the reference ('Hesperus-Phosphorus'), that the mode of reference fixing is relevant to epistemic questions. (Kripke [2011a], 131).

Now we take one extra step. Perhaps the sentence's ancillary contributions supply so much of the operator's needs that it doesn't notice, as it were, if *S* doesn't express a full-fledged proposition. Granted, if the ancillary contributions were made semantically by a further, non-referential, aspect of meaning, this would be objectionable to the Millian. But they might be made pragmatically, by the name itself considered as an aspect of context.[20] Perhaps all the operator needs from *S* is the logical form of the would-be proposition, plus reference-fixing constraints contextually triggered by the name.

7. REGULAR OLD, NON-REFERENCE-FIXING, CONDITIONALS

Kripke would object to both models that it is the rare name that has its reference fixed by a description in the strong sense here supposed. *If n exists, it is an F* is plausibly almost *never* a priori, not even conditionally so. Fortunately much of this story is dispensable anyway if the data point is simply that *n doesn't exist* carries for us distinct non-metalinguistic information.

Suppose I know, somehow or other, that *If A, then B*, or, better perhaps, *A only if B*.[21] Call *B* in that case an *indicative* consequence of *A* (for me, at the time in question). At least one way I have of learning that ¬*A* is by learning that some of *A*'s indicative consequences fail.[22]

I would seem to know, for instance, that if Vulcan exists, then there are planets closer to the sun than Mercury. It does not matter how I came to know it for this to figure in an explanation of what transpires at an informational level when I infer from Mercury's being the planet closest to the sun that Vulcan doesn't exist. It does not matter either whether the statement is a priori, or even conditionally a priori. It may be that Leverrier left the door slightly open to the possibility that Vulcan was *further* from the sun than Mercury and operated by *anti*-gravity. In that case my knowledge of the conditional turns in part

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[20]Lewis [1971], Crimmins and Perry [1989], Forbes [1990], Predelli [2010],Holliday and Perry [2014].

[21]Jackson [1979] argues that only-if conditionals are especially tollens-ready.

[22]There are niceties here but nothing that need concern us. For failures of dynamic modus ponens and tollens, see Jackson [1979] and McGee [2000]. Yalcin notes modus tollens is liable to fail when there are modals in the consequent, as for instance in miners' paradox conditionals (Yalcin [2012]).

on empirically grounded doubts about anti-gravity. This does not stop it from investing the statement that Vulcan doesn't exist with distinctive informational content.

There remains, you may say, the problem we've been wrestling with all along. How, if *Vulcan* is empty, can it contribute in distinctive fashion to conditionals like *If ... exists, then Mercury is not the closest planet to the sun*? But we saw in the last section that names can in certain contexts make their contribution non-referentially, by setting the value of some epistemic parameter. Then the context was *It is a priori that if n exists, then BLAH* and the parameter was for reference-fixing conditions. But the embedded conditional is itself an epistemic context in which names plausibly have the ear of other context-sensitive parameters: for guises, say, or epistemic counterpart relations, or conceptual covers, or cognitive roles.[23] We have then a third model of the distinctive information carried by *n doesn't exist*.

(1) Suppose it is known that *if n exists, then BLAH*.

(2) Then *n exists* indicatively implies, even if it expresses no proposition, that BLAH.

(3) To learn *n doesn't exist* is to learn that some such indicative implication is false.

The advantage of this model is that it's unified; we don't need one story for empty names and another for names with referents. *If n exists, then BLAH* may be known before it is determined whether BLAH. Should it turn out that BLAH, that is, or may be, evidence for the antecedent, and hence for there being such a thing as *n*. Should it turn out that ¬BLAH, that is evidence against the antecedent.

But the the model is still not as unified as we might like. What is meant by "evidence against the antecedent," if the antecedent doesn't express a proposition?

Two answers seem possible. First, the antecedent does express a proposition. It expresses the proposition, concerning EVERYTHING, that one of that crowd instantiates $\lambda x\ x=n$. This proposition's negation is a genuine truth. But it is not a distinctive truth; that

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[23]For non-referential contributions specifically in indicative conditionals, see Weatherson [2001], Santorio [2012]. That names don't behave in standard Kripkean ways in indicative and "would have turned out" conditionals is an old point (Yablo [2002]).

¬∃*y* [*λx x=Vulcan*](*y*) is the same fact as that ¬∃*y* [*λx x=Holmes*](*y*). The best we can say in this regard about *Vulcan doesn't exist* is that it's at least *associated* with the distinctive information that ¬BLAH: no planet is closer to the sun than Mercury.

Alternatively, we may think *Vulcan doesn't exist* fails to express a truth, perhaps on the theory that a non-distinctive truth doesn't cut it. We can still say, if we like, that *Vulcan exists* counts as false by virtue of indicatively implying a genuine falsehood, and that *Vulcan doesn't exist* counts as true. We can say indeed that it counts as true for a distinctive reason; its truth-countingness reflects the distinctive truth that no planet is closer to the sun than Mercury. But we can't say, yet, on either proposal, that *Vulcan doesn't exist* expresses a distinctive truth.

8. MORE ABOUT EVERYTHING

How might we get *Vulcan doesn't exist* to express a distinctive truth? The truth that EVERYTHING fails to instantiate *λx x=Vulcan* is not distinctive, because failure to instantiate *λx x=Vulcan* is the same semantically speaking as failure to instantiate *λx x=Holmes*. What the names contribute in both cases is just their emptiness. To obtain a distinctive truth we'd need a property like *λx x is Vulcan-ish*, and it is unclear where this is supposed to come from if the meaning of a name is exhausted by its referent.

But, as we know, that a name's *meaning* is exhausted by its referent does not mean the name's *truth-conditional contribution* is exhausted by its referent. This is familiar already from Quine's example of Giorgione being so-called because of his size.[24] The name contributes not only referentially but evocatively: as a feature of context controlling the interpretation of *so-called*. Kripke would seem committed anyway to the idea that names can contribute non-referentially, since that is what *Holmes* is doing, on his own view, in the phrase *proposition about Holmes*. We're looking, then, for a kind of property that is evoked by the name and that **o** must possess to have any hope of satisfying *λx x=Vulcan*. *Vulcan*

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[24]Quine [1956], Forbes [1997]

doesn't exist can then say of EVERYTHING that none of that number is in a position to be Vulcan, even bracketing the issue of whether Vulcan in fact exists.

This may seem a paradoxical thought. If we're bracketing whether Vulcan exists, aren't we bracketing whether Vulcan is one of EVERYTHING? And if we're leaving open that Vulcan might be one of EVERYTHING, then it is hard to see how we can hope to show that nothing in that crowd has a shot at being Vulcan.

A similar worry could in principle be raised about our claim earlier that *The king of France is bald* is false of THE BALD PEOPLE. Even bracketing whether there is such an individual the king of France, we said, we can still assure ourselves that none of THE BALD PEOPLE is him, by observing that none of them is *a* French king. The worry would be, who counts in this discussion as "them"? If we are bracketing whether there is such a thing as the king of France, how can we be sure he does not belong to the relevant subpopulation?

The answer is that "bracketing" here just means we are not relying on France's lack of a king in deriving consequences from facts that are neutral on whether France has a king: facts about THE BALD PEOPLE. We are wondering whether it can be ruled out in each case that x in particular is the king of France, never mind whether France has a king off to the side. A bit more carefully, can we find, for each bald person x, facts compatible with the antecedent that entail: even if France has a unique king, still x is not that individual? The corresponding question now is, can we find, for each existing thing x, facts compatible with the antecedent that entail: even if Vulcan exists, still x is not Vulcan?

One imagines that *Vulcan*'s lack of a referent need not get in the way here, if the term functions evocatively in the antecedent to recall a certain type of hypothesis or supposition, against the background of which the rest is to be evaluated. It seems not at all strange to observe that this cup at any rate cannot be Vulcan (even if Vulcan exists), because its gravitational field is too weak. I am encouraged here by the fact that Kripke points to such conditionals himself:

one might say, not knowing whether Sherlock Holmes exists or not, 'Whether or not there was a Sherlock Holmes, he isn't one of the people in this room, because the account about him was written long before any one of us had been born.' (Kripke [2013], ch6)

It does seem pretty clear that *If Holmes exists, he existed in the 19th century*, and hence that *If he exists, he is not one of us*, since none of us existed in the 19th century. This is not because we have fixed the reference of *Holmes* so that it can only stand for someone alive when Doyle was. We are open in principle to the possibility that Doyle, a lover of the occult, had precognition of the still unborn Holmes at some seance. It is just that we don't believe this occurred. If we more open to the possibility, we might not be so confident that Holmes, even if he exists, is not one of us in this room.

The proposal then is that *Vulcan does not exist* expresses distinctive information if it says of EVERYTHING—of each y— not that it lacks $\lambda x\ x = Vulcan$, but that it possesses $\lambda x\ x \neq$ *Vulcan even if Vulcan exists*. What makes the information distinctive is that the properties whereby a thing is not Holmes, even if Holmes exists, are nothing like the properties whereby it is not Vulcan, supposing that Vulcan exists.

9. DOUBLE MEANING

What would Kripke think of this proposal? We seem to be making use of basically Kripkean materials. Kripke never doubts for a moment that we can pretend Holmes exists, or suppose Vulcan does. The proposal is to explain existence-claims in terms of how that pretense or supposition relates to facts about the existing things. For Vulcan not to exist is for EVERYTHING to have the property of not being identical to Vulcan, on the supposition that Vulcan exists.

The claim that Holmes is at any rate not one of us *seems* to be without prejudice to whether Holmes ever existed. But Kripke is not so sure, for right around the passage just quoted, where it is observed that Holmes is not one of us even if he exists, he returns to

the idea that there are two claims we might be making, claims that can be brought under the same verbal umbrella only using the "no true proposition" device:

> one should, strictly speaking, once again say 'There is no such true proposition as that Sherlock Holmes is in this room,' where I understand the purported name 'Sherlock Holmes' and can therefore refer to this alleged proposition by a 'that' clause. (Kripke [2013], ch6).

Reflection on the conditionals leaves Kripke still thinking that

> in some sense the analysis of a singular existence statement will depend on whether that statement is true. And this, of course, seems in and of itself to be absolutely intolerable: the analysis of a statement should not depend on its truth-value. (Kripke [2013], ch6)

What is going on here? Our idea had been that *Holmes is not SJY, even if Holmes exists* is true for for the same reasons whether Holmes exists or not. Kripke seems to be rejecting this idea. He might be thinking as follows: if Holmes exists, then the conditional is true because two existing things (Holmes and SJY) are distinct, whereas if Holmes does not exist, the conditional is true because nothing is in a position to be Holmes.

The point is fair enough, but it overlooks something. A sentence's truth may be overdetermined. Even if Holmes exists, it remains that SJY has properties that prevent him from being Holmes; and so the conditional is true for two reasons, the distinctness fact already mentioned, and the properties that make SJY a poor candidate for identity with Holmes on the supposition that he exists. We may grant that *Holmes is not SJY, even if Holmes exists* does not hold for *exactly* the same reasons in either case, while still insisting that it is true in both cases for *a* shared reason, namely that I have properties (e.g. that Doyle has never written about me) that unsuit me for the Holmes role.

So far this speaks only to conditionals like *Holmes is not SJY, even if he exists*, not to *Holmes does not exist*. Our thought was that *Holmes does not exist*, if the topic is EVERYTHING—for short, US—expresses something like a conjunction of these conditionals, with a conjunct

for every one of US. Our further thought was that this conjunction holds whether Holmes exists or not, and for the same reason whether Holmes exists or not.[25]

But Kripke may now object as follows. The truth expressed by *n exists*, if it is true, is the singular proposition concerning **o** (the referent) that it exists. The truth expressed by its negation, if it is false, ought to be the negation of that singular proposition. But the latter truth was said to be the conjunction of a bunch of propositions about various *y*s' non-identity with *n*. And that conjunction is certainly not the negation of the singular proposition (<**o**, existence >) concerning **o** that it exists.

Here too, though, we need to keep our eye on the topic. The truth of *n exists* in ontological discussions is judged by what it says about US. What it says about US is, presumably, that *n* is one of US. This may be rendered, to a first approximation, as the disjunction (i) $\vee\{\|y=n\| \mid y$ is one of US$\}$ of all propositions to the effect that $y=n$, y ranging over US. The disjunction is at least *close* to the negation of what was said to make *n exists* false about US, if it is false: (ii) $\wedge\{\|y\neq n$, if n exists$\| \mid y$ is one of US$\}$.

But now, an existing thing y would seem trivially to satisfy λx $(x \neq n$, if n does not exist); make that stipulative if you like. An existing y which satisfies λx $(x \neq n$, if n exists) must also satisfy, given this stipulation, λx $(x \neq n$, regardless), and so λx $x \neq n$. This allows us to simplify our statement of what makes *n exists* false about US from

(ii) $\wedge\{\|y\neq n$, if n exists$\| \mid y$ is one of US$\}$, to

(ii*) $\wedge \{\|y\neq n\| \mid y$ is one of US$\}$.

Since (ii*) really *is* the negation of (i) ((i), recall, was $\vee\{\|y=n\| \mid y$ is one of US$\}$), we now have *n exists* saying the same about US whether it is true or not.[26]

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[25]Do we really want *Holmes does not exist* to hold whether Holmes exists or not? The claim was only that what the sentence says about US holds regardless.

[26]The proposition does admittedly change, in that WE are an **o**-including plurality if *n exists* is true, but not if it is false. But we shouldn't be bothered, arguably, about changes in what is said about US stemming entirely from changes in US. Compare Kripke's semantics for identity statements. Even for him, $a = b$ expresses different propositions depending on its truth-value. If true it expresses a proposition of the form <**o**,=,**o**>, if false one of the form <**o**,=,**p**> where **p** is distinct from **o**. I am not sure how bothered we should if the proposition expressed varies *topic*-wise with the sentence's truth-value.

10. CONCLUSION AND ISSUES REMAINING

Kripke proposes a NO TRUE PROPOSITION account of singular existentials. But he gestures as well in the direction of a SOME FALSE PROPOSITION account, which is what we have been trying to develop here. Some features of the account should be noted in closing, and some problems and open questions pointed out which will hopefully be addressed elsewhere.

Our account does not purport to identify a fixed, context-insensitive piece of information that one is always getting at in saying that Holmes does not exist. One is saying in effect that everything is disqualified. But the disqualifying properties are not explicitly stated and may differ from speaker to speaker according to the indicative conditionals they accept. Not everything is disqualified, of course, if Holmes exists; this could be either because there are more of US than we thought, or because one of US was Holmes all along.

The second possibility brings out a problem with the account. Why should there not be individuals who, although not Holmes as matters stand, are Holmes on the (incorrect) supposition that he exists? To reply to this, we would need to dig more deeply into the circumstances under which Holmes would have turned out to really exist. These are circumstances in which Doyle turns out to have been writing about someone real (perhaps he didn't realize it himself), as opposed to the stories turning out to be true. I am just repeating here what Kripke says about unicorns:

> I of course acknowledge that it might turn out that there really are unicorns, but one shouldn't regard this question as simply a question about whether there is an animal matching the description in the myth (Kripke [2013], ch 2).

Similarly bandersnatches exist if Carroll was writing, unbeknownst to his readers, about genuine animals, albeit possibly misdescribed in the poem:

> I once read a hypothetical story about Lewis Carroll in which it turned out that that was the case. Contrary to what we thought, he was writing a straightforward report about bandersnatches. (Actually I didn't read a

story; it was a comic strip.) At any rate this could turn out to have been the case. Suppose we had asked him and he said he was quite surprised that people thought he was talking about imaginary animals here; why, he himself used to be warned to avoid them when he walked through the park as a child, and that is what they were always called in his little region, though apparently the term has passed out of usage. So one could discover that, contrary to what we thought, bandersnatches are real (Kripke [2013], ch 2).

The problem I am raising can be put like this. Suppose Carroll ran into some Caucasian Ovcharkas in the park, which he was warned to avoid. These served as inspiration for the poem, but not to the extent that bandersnatches just are fancifully redescribed Caucasian Ovcharkas. It might still seem that Ovcharkas are such a good candidate for the role that bandersnatches *if they exist* are Ovcharkas.

This clearly cannot be the kind of conditional featuring in our theory, if it's to predict that bandersnatches do not exist. So more needs to be said about how the intended conditional is meant to work. I am attracted here to partition- or subject-matter-sensitive accounts along the lines of Kaufmann [2004], Khoo [2016], Yablo [2016], and Hoek [2018]. The subject matter in this case—US AS WE ARE, call it—would be an **m** that fixes enough of our properties to rule out our turning out to be bandersnatches if the latter exist. Ovcharkas in particular would have had to be different **m**-wise (Carroll would need to have met one, e.g.) to stand a chance of turning out to be bandersnatches.

But then if we hold fixed the world's **m**-condition in evaluating *Ovcharkas are bandersnatches, if bandersnatches exist*, this will be false in our world. Another way to put it is that bandersnatches if any will have to be a *further* thing, over and above the things that actually exist. Which makes it false of US AS WE ARE that one of us is a bandersnatch.

Kripke gets into the neighborhood of these issues when he asks, what exactly is it that we are excluding when we say that bandersnatches don't exist? One thing we are presumably excluding is that bandersnatches turn out to be some of us along the lines just suggested.

He goes so far as to suggest that we use *Bandersnatches don't exist* to "express the fact that such a discovery hasn't occurred" ([Kripke [2013], ch2). This is an exaggeration, surely. That bandersnatches don't exist is to do not with our discoveries, but what was there to be discovered. A more charitable reading of his idea is this: ovcharkas et al should have properties *P* such that *P*s are not bandersnatches, even if the latter exist. The problem is to find those properties and put them into US AS WE ARE, the subject matter to be held fixed in judging that we here in Dubuque are at any rate not bandersnatches.

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