

# Millianism, Empty Names and The No-Proposition View<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Millianism fundamentally holds that the semantic content of a proper name is its referent. Respectively, it implies that an empty name has no semantic content. Given an orthodox sense of proposition-talk and the Fregean principle of compositionality, Millianism further entails a disputable view on the semantics of empty-name sentences- namely, the No-Proposition View (NPV)- which states that empty-name sentences express no proposition. Thereby, NPV further indicates that empty-name sentences fail to convey meaningful, truth-evaluable, and distinguishable contents. However, as commonly discussed, such a semantic construal of empty-name sentences seemingly contradicts our linguistic intuitions about empty-name sentences such as 'Santa is Santa,' 'Santa doesn't exist,' and 'Sherlock doesn't exist'. This paper provides an extensive analysis of Millianism and NPV in the face of the semantic puzzles concerning the fundamental convictions behind NPV. In doing so, the paper intends to disclose the convictions leading Millianism to NPV so that it seeks to show how to rescue Millianism from the semantic puzzles in question. As a result, the paper concludes that NPV does not necessarily follow from a Millian thesis about the semantic value of proper names. Instead, it follows from certain convictions about the genuineness of proper names, the plausibility of non-referring names, the nature of propositions, and so on. As exemplified throughout the paper, it is thus fair to divorce Millianism from NPV by reconstruing the relevant convictions in one way or another.

**Keywords:** Millianism, Proper Names, Empty Names, Propositionalism, The No-Proposition View.

## Millianizm, Boş İsimler ve Önerme-Yok Görüşü

### Öz

Millianizm; özel isimlerin semantik içeriklerinin bu isimlerin göndermeleri olduğunu söyler. Buna göre, göndermeden yoksun özel isimlerin -yani, boş isimlerin- semantik içerikleri yoktur. Önermelere dair standart söylev ile Fregeci *bileşimsellik ilkesi* emniyetli kabuller olarak varsayıldığında; Millianizm, *boş-isim tümceleri* hakkında (yani boş isimleri kategorematik öğeler olarak biçmen içeren düzgün kurallı tümceler hakkında) genellikle "Önerme-Yok Görüşü" (ÖYG) olarak adlandırılan şu görüşe eklemlenir: Boş isim tümceleri önerme ifade etmez. Bu görüşün sonucu olarak boş-isim tümceleri anlamlı, doğruluk-koşulsal ve ayırt edilebilir içerikler aktaramaz. Sıklıkla tartışıldığı üzere, bu sonuçlar dilsel sezgilerimizle ters düşmektedir; çünkü 'Noel Baba yoktur', 'Sherlock Holmes yoktur' ve 'Noel Baba, Noel Baba'dır' gibi tümceler semantik olarak anlamlı, doğruluk-koşulsal ve birbirlerinden ayırt edilebilir görünmektedir. Bu makale, Millianizm ile ilişkilendirilen ÖYG'nin yüzleştiği üç temel semantik sorunu (*Anlam Sorunu*, *Doğruluk Sorunu* ve *Ayırt-edilebilirlik Sorunu*) ile bu sorunların arkasında yatan temel kabulleri tahlil edecektir. Bu tahlillere göre, Millianizm- özel isimlere dair doğrudan göndergeci semantik bir teori olarak- ÖYG'yi zorunlu olarak gerektirmez; çünkü, ÖYG özel isimlerin gönderimsel işlev ve semantik değerlerine dair bir görüşün tekil ve mantıksal bir sonucu olmaktan ziyade boş isim, önerme ve bileşimsellik kavramlarına dair spesifik kabullerin müşterek bir sonucudur. Nitekim makalede örnekleneceği üzere; boş isimler, önermeler ve bileşimsellik kavramlarına dair farklı kabuller benimsemek Millianizmi ÖYG'nin getirdiği semantik sorunsallardan uzaklaştırmaktadır- öyle ki, pek çok filozof için bu kavramlara dair yeni yaklaşımlar sunmak Millianizmi ÖYG kaynaklı semantik sorunlara karşı savunmak için erişilebilir bir strateji haline gelmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Millianizm, Özel İsimler, Boş İsimler, Önermeselcilik, Önerme-Yok Görüşü.

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## Introduction

Millianism is a family of direct referentialist stances on what semantic significance proper names carry out. It generically relies on the austere thesis that a proper name's semantic content/meaning is nothing other than its referent. In this context, Millianism entails that empty names have no semantic content. Given an orthodox sense of proposition-talk and the Fregean principle of compositionality as accustomed platitudes about the semantic analysis of well-formed sentences, Millianism consequently attains the thesis that empty-name sentences express no proposition at all. This Millian proposal on empty-name sentences is commonly coined as the No-Proposition View, or NPV for short.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, NPV hereby entails that empty-name sentences fail to convey meaningful, truth-evaluable, and distinguishable contents semantically. At face value, these conclusions about the semantics of empty-name sentences strike as counter-intuitive considering how ordinary rational speakers entertain empty-name sentences in meaningful exchanges or construe beliefs with such sentences. Thus, empty-name sentences present *prima facie* problems to Millianism with respect to NPV.

This paper intends to explore Millianism and NPV in the face of the semantic puzzles presented by empty-name sentences. To this end, the paper consists of three sections. First, I provide an extensive survey on Millianism regarding some underlying convictions (i.e. *emptiness*, *propositionalism*, and *compositionality*) –all of which play a part in leading Millianism to NPV. As will be discussed, the scope of Millianism extends to NPV only if Millianism involves certain conceptions of empty names, propositions, and compositionality: 1) A proper name- if natural languages have any genuine proper name at all, might genuinely lack a semantic content; 2) a proposition, if there are such entities at all, is the semantically and truth-evaluably significant content of such and such sentences in natural languages; 3) a proposition is composed of the semantic contents of the terms entertained in a sentence. Secondly, I introduce the semantic puzzles for NPV, which I respectively call the *problem of meaningfulness*, the *problem of truth-evaluability*, and the *problem of indistinguishability*. As the discussion goes on, each of them seems to undermine our semantic intuitions about what empty-name sentences mean, and each puzzle indicates that Millianism unwarrantedly implies a systematic error in our understanding of what empty-name sentences convey semantically. Merging the first two sections, I finally discuss how the convictions behind NPV generate these very puzzles for Millianism. In this regard, I also address how some Millian philosophers seek to revise Millianism in the face of NPV by holding distinct takes on the relevant convictions behind NPV. In doing so, I defend that the semantic puzzles in question merely follow from a particular set of convictions that a Millian theory of empty names does not have to follow.

### 1. Millianism, Emptiness, and Propositionalism

In natural languages, there are several sorts of singular expressions such as singular common noun phrases (e.g. 'a dog', 'a zombie'), quantified expressions ('each dog', 'one zombie'), and so on. Also, there is an ostensible convention that some of these singular expressions point out particular individuals exclusively by their linguistic roles. Proper names (e.g. 'John Perry', 'Santa Claus'), definite descriptive expressions (e.g., 'the present queen of Netherlands', 'The highest counting number'), and some deictic phrases (e.g. 'this dog', 'that zombie') allegedly exemplify singular expressions that function to pick out a particular individual among the other things in a given domain of discourse. Provided that there are genuine cases of such expressions, proper names are taken as singular expressions which purport to designate a particular individual only and nothing

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion see, Seyed M. Mousavian, "Gappy Propositions?," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 41, (2011/1): 125-157.

else in a given domain of discourse to the effect that it can be defined as follows: For any proper name  $N$ ,  $N$  is a singular term stipulated by a speaker  $S$  in a language  $L$  to uniquely denote a particular object  $O$  only and nothing else in a domain of discourse  $W$  where  $O$  is considered to take place.

Noticeably, every discussion related to the semantics of proper names starts with the conviction that there are genuinely proper names in one way or another. There is no substantial controversy on the denoting function of proper names, although there is too much controversy on the scope and nature of their denoting function. In this respect, philosophers often diverge in two camps, i.e. Descriptivism and Millianism, on the question of how a proper name  $N$  enables a speaker  $S$  to uniquely single out its nominatum  $O$  in  $W$ . A proper name, for the former camp, functions to say of its nominatum uniquely via a medium (i.e. descriptive content exclusively associated with this name), whereas a proper name, for the later camp, functions to say of the nominatum uniquely on its own right like a tag directly pointing out the nominatum in question.

On the one hand, Descriptivism posits that a proper name  $N$  uniquely purports to single out an individual thing  $O$  in discourse  $W$  if and only if  $N$  occurs as *the D*, which stands for a disguised definite description (or a cluster of them)<sup>4</sup> associated with  $N$  by the speaker  $S$ . In this fashion, *the D* works as a semantic mediator between the name and its nominatum so that it enables the speaker to point out the thing named  $N$  uniquely. For Descriptivism, the name ‘Aristotle’ singles out a particular man uniquely because speakers associate the name ‘Aristotle’ with definite descriptions such as ‘the student of Plato’ or ‘the teacher of Alexander the Great’, which mediate the speakers to pick out Aristotle himself. In short, proper names denote only through some definite descriptive content mediating a proper name with its putative nominatum. Therefore, Descriptivism implies that the cognitive significance of a proper name does not come from what it intends to denote but from how it intends to denote. Consequently, the semantic content of a proper name turns out to be a definite descriptive content (or a cluster of definite descriptive contents) that a speaker associates with the proper name in question.<sup>5</sup> Here, Frege’s puzzle of identity provides a vivid illustration of what semantic content proper names convey according to Descriptivism. As he discusses, the sentences ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’ and ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ should express the same trivially true statement if the semantic content of these co-referential terms is their common nominatum, i.e. the planet Venus. However, the sentence ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ seems informative rather than trivial since each proper name corresponds to distinct descriptions for the same thing.

Millianism, on the other hand, holds an austere thesis that a proper name directly stands for its nominatum only and nothing else. As a generalized stance on the semantics of proper names, it is named after J.S. Mill’s views on proper names in his book *A System of Logic*. As an embodiment of this stance, Mill remarks:

<sup>4</sup> The classical construal of Descriptivism was first introduced by Frege (1892) in ‘On Sense and Reference’ and then was championed by Russell (1905) in his work ‘On Denoting’. According to this construal,  $N$  stands for a function from a singular denoting expression *the D* to the object  $O$  in the sense that *the D* is a single way of presenting  $O$ . Yet, this construal of Descriptivism entails that a descriptive content for a singular entity named  $N$  may vary based on which singular descriptive content a speaker associates with the name on particular occasion of use; thereby, the associated content for the very same proper name may vary from speaker to speaker and it may even vary for the same speaker over time. On the other hand, Searle (1958) provides another account of Descriptivism in which the descriptive content revealed by a proper name does not have to be selectively singular as in the last example. According to him, the descriptive content *the D* for the name  $N$  may be a cluster of definite descriptions each of which is associated with the object on certain occasions. For more, see: Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting,” *Mind* 14, (1905/4): 479–493.; John R. Searle, “Proper Names,” *Mind* 67, (1958/266): 166–173.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘semantic content’ corresponds to what informative or cognitively significant content linguistic expressions conventionally convey.

“...proper names have strictly no meaning [connotation]; they are mere marks for individual objects; and when a proper name is predicated of another proper name, all the signification conveyed is, that both the names are the marks for the same object”<sup>6</sup>

In this vein, the proper name *N*, for Millianism, purports to uniquely speak of the individual *O* in the discourse *D* on its own right without any descriptive content mediating *N* with *O* in *D*. Millianism, unlike Descriptivism, posits that proper names do not inherit the associated descriptions as their semantic content. However, it does not amount to say that a proper name, for Millianism, can never be identified or associated with some descriptive content in some non-semantic manner.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Millianism emphasizes that these associations are truth-conditionally or semantically irrelevant since proper names are mere markers that semantically convey what they directly denote. For Millianism, the name ‘Aristotle’ does not inherently or semantically speak of the man himself as such and such, yet the name uniquely denotes Aristotle himself regardless of whether the name is associated with a denoting description. In short, Millianism offers a direct referentialist construal on the semantics of proper names in the sense that the sole semantic content of a proper name, if it has any, is the nominatum/referent in question.<sup>8</sup>

Thus far, Millianism seems to entertain two core tenets about proper names: (1) There are genuinely proper names in ordinary and/or formal languages; (2) a proper name has no semantic content other than its referent. However, Millianism encounters a fundamental puzzle about accommodating these two tenets with the linguistic phenomena that some singular terms, which are stipulated to pick out an individual only and nothing else in a discourse, might fail to denote whatever these terms are intended to pick out in the given discourse. In such a case, Millianism has to figure out whether such singular terms are genuine proper names and whether they have any semantic contribution to the sentences in which they occur.

In this respect, it is fair to ask how ordinary proper names fail to denote a particular individual. The above portrayal of proper names suggests that a singular term *N* fails to denote a putative individual *O* in a discourse *D* if and only if *O* does not take any place in *D* where *N* is stipulated to denote.<sup>9</sup> So, the intended relation between a name and its putative nominatum might not hold simply because there might be no such nominatum in a given discourse. Thus, a proper name failing to denote is vacuous from a referent in relevant discourse; hereby, it is called an *empty name*. To clarify the phenomena, it might be helpful to visit some ostensible cases regardless of any further discussion about the theoretical grounds for the plausibility of such ordinary proper names.

<sup>6</sup> John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence, and the Methods of Scientific Investigation* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1843), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Pragmatic Millianism, for instance, underlines that the so-called definite descriptions associated with proper names are not semantically but pragmatically conveyed by means of some pragmatic mechanisms.

<sup>8</sup> Direct referentialism corresponds to a more-broad scale and more comprehensive theory on the semantics of various denoting expressions. More precisely, Direct Referentialism represents various semantic stances that expand the core thesis of Millianism with respect to the distinct types of denoting expressions and the distinct manners of denoting. For instance, David Kaplan (1989), as a direct referentialist, extends the Millian stance about proper names to provide an analysis for the semantics of indexicals and demonstratives while Saul Kripke (1980) adopts a direct referentialist stance not only on proper names but also on natural kind terms. Again, Kripke (1980) also argues that a proper name, if it has any referent, rigidly denotes the same referent in all possible worlds. See, David Kaplan, “Demonstratives” in *Themes from Kaplan*, eds. J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein (Oxford University Press, 1989), 481-563.; and also see, Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of argument, I tentatively hold such a depiction of empty names although there has been a long-standing debate over the characterization of this notion with respect to the distinct theories on proper names, reference and reference failure. For more, see Mark Sainsbury, *Reference without Referents* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

The names of hypothetical entities in various discourses provide standard examples for empty names. To illustrate, Anthony LeVerrier, a 19th-century astronomer, postulated the planet Vulcan between Mercury and the Sun to account for the anomalies in Mercury's orbital trajectory; but, it later turned out that there was no such a celestial body situated between Mercury and the Sun. Thereby, 'Vulcan' turns out to lack a referent in a given discourse, although the name is stipulated to pick out a particular individual only. Similarly, proper names of non-actual individuals belonging to fictional, hypothetical, and mythical discourses (e.g. 'Santa Claus', 'Vulcan', and 'Pegasus') seem to be empty of a referent when they are introduced to speak of actuality.<sup>10</sup> Thus, some utterances of the name "Santa Claus" fail to denote if these utterances are taken to pick out an individual in discourse about actuality.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, a proper name lacking an actual referent might not fail to denote an individual in fictional discourses. If naming something by a proper name involves the components such as a speaker, an expression, and context, then it is fair to hold that the context under which a speaker intends to use a proper name *N* also determines the referent in question. Thus, a speaker, with the right intention, may use an empty name to refer to a non-actual individual in discourse about fiction.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the proper names in the statements 1(a)-(d) fail to denote something in a discourse about actuality if the statements are asserted to speak of actual individual objects and their states of affairs in actuality.

(1)

(a) Pegasus exists.

(b) Sherlock Holmes is a detective.

(c) LeVerrier's Vulcan is not Mr. Spock's home planet.

(d) Odyssey set ashore while sound asleep.

Hence, the first two statements (1) (a) and (1) (b) may accordingly convey the sentences 'Pegasus (fictionally) exists' and 'Sherlock Holmes is a (fictional) detective'. Similarly, the third statement might be about some trans-fictional discourse where the fictional objects from the different fictional discourses occur in the same statement. Again, the final statement might say something about a character within a given fictional discourse. In brief, these names do not fail to refer when they speak of fictional discourses, although they fail to refer when they are taken to speak of actuality. Thereby, proper names for non-actual individuals can be taken as empty names in discourse about actuality for our current objective.<sup>13</sup>

In case Millian theorists admit that some proper names in ordinary languages have no referent "whatsoever, concrete, abstract, or nonexistent object" depending on the adopted discourse, they thereby commit

<sup>10</sup> It is important to notice that names for hypothetical or fictional entities necessarily fail to refer. A name can be stipulated in hypothetical context, but it may still refer to an actual object. For instance, the planet Neptune was also found by mathematical prediction, by knowledge of description ('the planet exterior to Uranus') then it was demonstrated that there is such an actual planet named 'Neptune'.

<sup>11</sup> As will be seen later, Millians such as Nathan Salmon beg the difference here and claim that the so-called empty names of all hypothetical, fictional, and mythical individuals refer to 'abstract' or 'non-existent' individual objects consisting of unactualised properties in the non-actual contexts where they occur.

<sup>12</sup> For more, see: David Braun, "Empty Names, Fictional names, Mythical names," *Noûs* 39, (2005): 596- 631.; Keith Donnellan, "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions," *Synthese* 21, (1970): 335-358.; Keith Donnellan, "Speaking of Nothing," *Philosophical Review* 83, (1974): 3-31.

<sup>13</sup> My objective in this paper does not cover discussions on empty names in fictional, trans-fictional, and meta-fictional contexts. For further discussion, see: Fred Adams, Gary Fuller and Robert Stecker, "The Semantics of Fictional Names," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78, (1997): 128-148.; Nathan Salmon, "Nonexistence," *Nous* 32, (1998): 277-319.; Peter van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14, (1977): 299-308.

themselves to the assumption that some proper names are genuinely empty from any referent.<sup>14</sup> This conviction, which I call *the emptiness conviction*, is the initial tenet for Millianism to entail NPV. If there are genuinely proper names and some of them genuinely lack a referent in every relevant and accessible domain of discourses where they are purported to denote, then Millianism entails that such proper names have no semantic content to contribute. The emptiness conviction leads Millianism to further semantic commitments once *propositionalism* and *the principle of compositionality* are also endorsed.

Typically, *propositionalism* corresponds to the conviction that there are propositions as theoretical entities and that they are the semantic contents of well-formed sentences<sup>15</sup>. Propositions as theoretical entities may be depicted in various ways and with various roles, depending on what theory one adopts on the nature of propositions. They might or might not be considered mind-independent and non-linguistic entities. Again, their roles may vary from one theory to another; they may even play several roles simultaneously. They might be construed as the primary bearers of truth/falsehood, “the relata of logical relations such as consistency, inconsistency, and consequence; contents of the cognitive attitudes such as belief; what is asserted in contexts of utterance; and compositional sentential semantic values”.<sup>16</sup> Provided that there are propositions as the semantic contents conveyed by at least certain types of sentences, *the principle of compositionality* relevantly contends that the proposition expressed by a sentence is a complex entity composed of the semantic contents of the sentential constituents of the relevant sentence. If these convictions are the case, then Millianism concludes that the sentences employing empty names as their categorematic constituents, i.e., empty-name sentences, fail to express a proposition.<sup>17</sup> In this picture, a proposition, after all, is a complete semantic function comprised of the contents of the relevant sentential constituents (e.g., individuals, relations, properties) and yet empty names have no semantic content to contribute to the sentences in which they are employed.

Consequently, Millianism-along with the above convictions- entails that empty-name sentences express no proposition. Thereby, Millianism ends up with a particular semantic stance, namely The No-Proposition View (NPV). NPV is a peculiar extension of Millianism in the sense that Descriptivism does not implicate the same conclusion even though it also harbors the same convictions about emptiness, propositionalism, and semantic compositionality. In this respect, Descriptivism allows us to employ an empty name in a sentence to construe a proposition because such names do not lack any semantic content to contribute. Thus, the sentence ‘Santa Claus does not exist’, as Millianism suggests, expresses no proposition while it expresses a proposition for Descriptivism.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Seyed N. Mousavian, “The Varieties of Gappy Propositions” in *The Routledge Handbook of Propositions*, eds. C. Tillman and A. Murray (Routledge, 2022), 454.

<sup>15</sup> Mousavian, “The Varieties of Gappy Propositions,” 437.

<sup>16</sup> Lorraine J. Keller, “Propositions Without Parts” in *The Routledge Handbook of Propositions*, eds. C. Tillman and A. Murray (Routledge, 2022), 321.

<sup>17</sup> I use the term ‘empty-name sentence’ for referring to the assertive utterances of atomic or molecular well-formed sentences which using empty names in their argument positions with categorematic roles under non-fictional discourses. For instance, the assertive utterances in non-fictional discourses such as ‘Santa is jolly’, ‘Santa is non-existent’ and ‘Santa is not a mall Santa’ are empty-name sentences.

<sup>18</sup> To the Russellian analysis, the definite description *the D* associated with the empty name *N* amounts to the claim that there is a unique *D*; and thus, ‘the *D* doesn’t exist’, under the correct scope reading of negation, means that it is not the case that there is a unique *D* and it exists. Thereby, such a sentence comes out true since the embedded conjunction is false and its negation is true.

Here, empty-name sentences present prima facie problems to Millianism from the perspective of NPV. Simply put, the sentence ‘Santa Claus doesn’t exist’ seems meaningful and truth-evaluable so that we entertain this sentence in our meaningful conversational exchanges and valid inferences without any seeming anomaly. Nevertheless, NPV indicates otherwise. In short, endorsing NPV imposes some explanatory burdens on Millianism, so its proponents must either “explain away these problems from the perspective of No Proposition View” or provide some alternative Millian accounts which dodge away from these burdens.<sup>19</sup> In what follows, I introduce the relevant puzzles for Millianism from the perspective of NPV while explicating how each puzzle challenges NPV.

## 2. The Three Puzzles for NPV

Regarding the empty-name sentences below, NPV says that they all fail to express a proposition.

(2)

- (a) Sherlock Holmes does not exist.
- (b) Santa Claus does not exist.
- (c) Father Xmas does not exist.
- (d) Superman is identical to Clark Kent.
- (e) Santa is Santa.
- (f) Vulcan is a planet.
- (g) Santa Claus is a planet.
- (h) Vulcan is non-self-instantiable.
- (i) Vulcan is non-existent.

NPV brings out three conclusions about (2) (a)-(i): (1) They all fail to express something meaningful; (2) They all fail to express something truth-evaluable; (3) They are indistinguishable from each other in terms of their semantic contents. In this regard, these conclusions accordingly raise three puzzles for Millianism.<sup>20</sup>

First, it seems that rational and competent speakers sensibly employ these sentences in their beliefs, thoughts, and inferences without recognizing that these sentences express nothing meaningful. Thus, ordinary speakers’ so-called semantic intuitions about the empty-name sentences above imply that these sentences convey some semantic content to entertain in their sensible conversations and inferences. Hence, such intuitions further undermine the plausibility of NPV unless Millianism reasonably sorts out how to accommodate ordinary speakers’ seeming intuitions about the semantics of proper names. Hereafter I call this puzzle *the problem of meaningfulness* (PM).

Secondly, the next puzzle, which I call *the problem of truth-evaluability* (PT), follows from the conclusion that empty-name sentences express nothing truth-evaluable. For NPV, (2)(a)-(i) fail to express any truth-bea-

<sup>19</sup> Braun, “Empty Names,” 463.

<sup>20</sup> David Braun (1993) is the first to discuss the semantic puzzles here although he mentions them by different names. Again, philosophers such as Mousavian (2011) cover the same puzzles in addition to some others. Notably, the puzzles introduced here do not exhaust all the semantic hurdles with which NPV must meet. There are more semantic concerns derivable from other relevant aspects of semantics such as modal contexts, propositional attitudes and so on.

ring content (i.e. proposition) in the sense that they are neither true nor false. Again, rational and competent speakers' intuitions seem to suggest otherwise. To illustrate, (2)(f) and (2)(g) appear patently false since they seem to state that a non-actual entity has a property in actuality. In a more significant manner, our intuitions stubbornly suggest that the negative existential sentences (2) (a)-(c) are true. For one thing, the very reason why empty names fail to denote in a discourse about actuality is the case that such individuals are not present in actuality. Therefore, such empty-name sentences seem to assert something true. For another thing, (2) (e) and (2) (f), which are identity statements, seemingly have a certain truth value. For instance, the sentences 'Vulcan is Neptune' and 'Vulcan is Tatooine' seem false, whereas the sentences 'Father Xmas is Santa Claus', and 'Father Xmas is Father Xmas' seem patently true. Thus, our truth-theoretical intuitions about such cases imply that Millianism endorsing NPV needs to account for these intuitions.

Finally, the third puzzle for Millianism, i.e. *the problem of indistinguishability* (PI), directly pertains to the tenet that the sentences (2) (a)-(i) express no semantic content. In this respect, these sentences are to be indistinguishable from each other based on their semantic contents since they, as NPV suggests, do not encode any sensible content to be compared. Again, this implication does not jibe with ordinary speakers' intuitions about what these sentences express. For one thing, rational and competent speakers may reasonably believe or disbelieve the sentences above based on their reflection on what each sentence represents through their seemingly distinguishable subject matters, sentential structures, and so on. Ordinary speakers seem to be in a position to hold that (2)(a) and (2)(b) say something different while (2)(b) and (2)(c) say the same thing.

These three puzzles, i.e. PM, PT, and PI, seem to thrive on one single challenge that Millianism does not a fortiori accommodate with ordinary speakers' allegedly common feelings on the semantics of empty-name sentences. Although such a depiction is practical to converge each puzzle on a single critique, it is somewhat misleading to grasp what Millianism has to sort out about NPV. In such a depiction, these puzzles heavily rely on a sort of folk semantics so that NPV as a particular extension of Millianism, in turn, may become a sort of *error theory* as follows:

P1. Ordinary speakers make sense of empty-name sentences.

P2. Empty-name sentences have no semantic content.

C. Thus, ordinary speakers are in systematic error.

If the above argument is granted, any proponent of NPV can bite the bullet and endorse that the formal semantics of empty-name sentences do not have to overlap with our intuitions about what such sentences say. Such a maneuver would be a straightforward move for Millianism to explain away PM, PT, and PI inasmuch as Millianism further grounds where such a systematic error stems from.

Nonetheless, Millianism can get away from such a task on some fair points about the volatile and un-unifiable nature of the folk semantics. First, it is unclear if every – or almost every- ordinary speaker commonly intuits the same value or the same content for the same utterance. After all, ordinary speakers' intuitions on what an empty-name sentence says might vary depending on speakers' distinct epistemic, cognitive, and meta-linguistic stands about the given utterance. Again, such intuitions rest on non-theoretical grounds (such as psychological or communicative grounds) so that ordinary speakers call an expression 'meaningful' or 'true' irrespective of any theoretical integrity amongst speakers' intuitions. As Braun suggests, a speaker can



believe in the meaningfulness of the utterance just because she has a deferential belief that the one who utters the sentence is a reliable source to take her utterance as meaningful.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Piccinini and Scott “conducted an informal survey of 45 speakers” who were asked to evaluate the given empty-name sentences “are true, false, or have no truth value”.<sup>22</sup> As the survey indicates, the ordinary speakers’ semantic intuitions on a variety of empty-name sentences significantly hinge on their syntactic or conversational familiarity with the provided morphology of given empty names in the sense that “the more a word looks like a proper name, the more subjects are inclined to treat it as meaningful, even though there is reason to believe that the word has no referent”.<sup>23</sup> That is to say; the survey takers are dominantly inclined to think the empty-name sentences have a truth value when the relevant empty names appear morphologically akin to proper names in a given language, such as ‘Santa Claus’ or ‘Mickey Mouse’ although the survey takers dominantly incline to think a sentence such as ‘Shmanta Shmaus doesn’t exist’ has no truth value.<sup>24</sup> Thus, our semantic intuitions might even be steered by the morphological factors peculiar to the received language. Consequently, it seems untenable to posit our folk semantics as a singular and consistent bulk that debunks formal semantics on a unified ground. Therefore, it is an overarching task for any formal semantic theory to meet with some presumed folk semantics. In this regard, a proponent of NPV might even ignore the puzzles (i.e. PM, PT, and PI) since any objection from our linguistic intuitions might be negligible at any rate.

However, grounding the gist of these puzzles in folk semantics omits the gravity of the puzzles in terms of formal semantics. That is to say, the puzzles above still pose theoretically significant challenges to NPV regardless of reading them through folk semantics. After all, each puzzle also indicates some theoretical inconsistency about the Millian semantics of empty-name sentences. PM, for instance, shows that Millianism- from the perspective of NPV or from some other perspective- must explain away how ordinary speakers represent and entertain empty-name sentences in their thoughts, beliefs, and inferences, although such sentences have no content to contribute. Again, Millianism must offer a peculiar account of how to read and reconstruct negative existential sentences such as (2)(a) without saying something meaningless about some non-actual individuals that we intend to deny their presence in actuality. In the face of PT, any proponent of NPV must also explain away how the sentences (2)(a)-(g) do not represent nor misrepresent anything about the world or language itself to be true or false. Regarding PI, the proponents of NPV must further sort out how the sentences above can be semantically or non-semantically distinguishable from each other because some of them have distinct grammatical structures, and some of them have distinct words encoding distinct semantic values. In brief, the proponents of Millianism must explain away the semantic puzzles PM, PT, and PI from the perspective of NPV or some other perspective if they seek to preserve the theoretical coherence of Millianism in general.

In short, it is worth reiterating that Millianism entails NPV -and thereby the semantic puzzles - only if some particular convictions about emptiness, propositionalism, and compositionality are the case. Therefore, the Millian theorists might still have enough room to divorce their entire agenda from the NPV-related puzzles. After all, what they need to do for this end is to modify or amend the relevant convictions. Hence, there seem to be several ways for Millianism to avoid the puzzles by giving up or revising the convictions leading

<sup>21</sup> Braun, “Empty Names, Fictional Names, Mythical Names,” 608-614.

<sup>22</sup> Gualtiero Piccinini and Sam Scott, “Recovering What is Said with Empty Names,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 40, (2010/2): 257.

<sup>23</sup> Piccinini and Scott, “Recovering What is Said with Empty Names,” 258.

<sup>24</sup> See Piccinini and Scott, “Recovering What is Said with Empty Names,” 239-274.

to NPV. In the literature, some Millian philosophers mainly take issues with these convictions to preserve the very fundamental Millian thesis that a proper name, if genuine, has no semantic content other than its referent. In what follows, I demonstrate how some Millian philosophers deal with the puzzles above.

### 3. Shifting Millianism from NPV

As discussed earlier, NPV constitutes a particular extension of Millianism over the semantics of empty-name sentences, and it mainly follows from a set of convictions about emptiness, propositionalism, and compositionality. Naturally, NPV is separable from Millianism if and only if it is tenable to drop the convictions behind NPV or hold some other convictions in an equally explanatory manner consistent with the thesis that the semantic content of a proper name is its referent. Provided that the NPV-related puzzles essentially hinge on the convictions in question, it is also tenable for a Millian to shift her account from the NPV-related puzzles by modifying or amending the relevant convictions. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Millian philosophers in the literature take issues with these convictions to deal with the NPV-related puzzles.

One strategy for a Millian to shift from NPV is to work against its initial tenet, i.e. the emptiness conviction, which contends that some proper names genuinely lack a referent. Here, a Millian can deny the emptiness assumption in one way or another if she grounds the conviction that there is no genuine case for empty names in ordinary languages. As hinted earlier, one might challenge the emptiness assumption by holding a restricted domain of genuinely proper names so that she might leave out empty names such as ‘Vulcan’ or ‘Shmanta Schmaus’ in ordinary languages based on the conviction that they, unlike genuinely proper names, are never purely denotative signs. The rationale behind excluding ordinary empty names might rest on the conviction that proper names solely name particular individuals in the most direct possible manner, which in turn requires the subjects’ immediate access to the objects. The conviction can be traced back to Anselm’s principle that “if it does not signify anything, it is not a name”.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, a Millian might plausibly argue that empty names are not genuinely proper names if they do not signify any singular individual directly accessible in a given domain of discourse. Such a stance, especially from the perspective of logical empiricism, makes sense since the empiricist criterion of cognitive significance requires proper names to have empirically accessible referents. Again, the motivation behind such a stance might come from the empiricist conviction that speakers introduce genuine proper names through ostension only, i.e. by simply pointing out an individual in question. If empty names, by default, do not have any ostensibly accessible nominatum to mark, then it seems fair to argue that speakers must introduce empty names such as ‘Vulcan’ or ‘Santa Claus’ only via definite descriptions such as ‘the tenth planet’ or ‘the jolly bringer of Xmas’ in the first place. After all, speakers are not directly acquainted with what empty names stand for, although they somehow come to use these names to mark something. In brief, the semantic puzzles concerning NPV would not occur if empty names are not genuinely proper names. After all, the semantic content of such names, according to Millianism, would not be their putative referents. If such a defense works out for Millianism, it does not end up with PM, PT, and PI. Of course, this stance on the emptiness conviction might have its own challenges for Millianism, even if it manages to dodge away from PM, PT, and PI. For instance, such a stance seems to trivialize Millianism as a semantic theory of proper names in the face of Descriptivism if Millianism does not propose any means to analyze names in natural languages.

<sup>25</sup> Sainsbury, *Reference without Referents*, 91.

Furthermore, some Millian theorists might also prefer to take a different path to tackle the emptiness conviction. Rather than disaffirming the genuineness of so-called empty names as proper names, a Millian, per se, might tackle the emptiness conviction by denying that some or all empty names genuinely fail to pick out any individual in some accessible discourse. Hence, a Millian can defend that empty names meet with a referent, actual or non-actual, in one way or another. Here, Nathan Salmon (1998)<sup>26</sup>, an abstract referentialist, seeks to discredit the emptiness conviction in such a Meinongian manner, and he argues that all proper names within hypothetical, fictional, and mythical discourses refer to ‘abstract’ or ‘non-existent’ individual objects consisting of unactualised properties in the non-actual contexts where they occur. Consequently, ‘Santa Claus’ refers to a particular abstract object having such and such fictional properties under some discourse. Hence, some Millians like Salmon hold that proper names from hypothetical or fictional discourses are not (genuine) empty names at all since they have abstract referents. Thus, the sentence ‘Vulcan is non-actual’ seems to express a proposition if abstract referentialism is the case. Again, such a stance comes with its own puzzles for Millianism, even if it explains away the NPV-related ones. Obviously, it requires a Millian to rule out ontological parsimony in the sense that every proper name stipulated in every natural language indispensably matches an individual object.

Even if Millian philosophers are content to hold the emptiness conviction, they still find enough room to divorce Millianism from NPV by modifying and amending the rest of the convictions. In this respect, it is further plausible for Millianism to work on propositionalism to the extent that empty-name sentences might, in return, be construed to express truth-evaluable semantic contents. Such treatments are attainable depending on what linguistic and semantic theory of propositions we should adopt while evaluating some or all sorts of empty-name sentences. First, philosophers such as Donnellan (1974)<sup>27</sup> expand the scope of propositionalism by assigning an exceptional semantic/truth-conditional role to existential statements. Here, philosophers do not rule out that propositions are theoretical entities which stand for what sentences semantically and truth-conditionally convey. Nonetheless, they rule out a generalized NPV thesis that empty-name sentences express no proposition in the sense that they think existential sentences employing an empty name exceptionally have a truth-evaluable content either due to the exceptional semantic status of the predicate ‘existence’. To demonstrate, Donnellan puts forward the meta-theoretical rule to assign truth values to existential empty-name sentences:

“(R) If N is a proper name that has been used in predicative statements with the intention to refer to some individual, and then ‘FN does not exist’ is true if and only if the history of those uses ends in a block”.<sup>28</sup>

As (R) suggests, the empty name sentence such as ‘Santa does not exist’ is true if and only if the name ‘Santa’ does not refer. Therefore, according to (R), negative existential sentences such as ‘Vulcan does not exist’ come out true; after all, his rule states that Vulcan does not exist if and only if ‘Vulcan’ does not refer. Nonetheless, such takes on propositionalism seem to be rather non-unified attempts since they only provide isolated and meta-theoretical treatments for certain sorts of empty-name sentences. Because they only expand the scope of propositionalism to warrant some empty-name sentences as truth-evaluable regardless of providing a full-fledged treatment for every empty-name sentence. Furthermore, Donnellan’s meta-theoretical rule,

<sup>26</sup> Salmon, “Nonexistence,” 277-319.

<sup>27</sup> Donnellan, “Speaking of Nothing,” 3-31.

<sup>28</sup> Donnellan, “Speaking of Nothing,” 25.

at least, is not free from theoretical concerns, even though it figures out the semantic puzzles for existential statements. Donnellan's rule seems to take 'reference' and 'existence' as synonymous or mutually exclusive in all possible worlds, so Donnellan's theory of reference does not ground reference independently of existence.<sup>29</sup>

Apart from the above strategies, Millian theorists such as Adams et al. (1994, 1997, 2004, 2007)<sup>30</sup> and Braun (1993, 2005)<sup>31</sup> seek to provide a unified account to shift Millianism from the drawbacks of NPV. For this purpose, they interpret the conviction about propositionalism in terms of the Russellian structured propositions. According to their construal, a proposition expressed by an atomic sentence has a logical structure in the form of an ordered pair that mirrors the sentences' logical/grammatical structure.<sup>32</sup> In other words, a proposition is a structured entity – neither abstract nor mind-dependent- that contains argument positions or slots corresponding to the logical/grammatical structure of the given sentence. Moreover, these argument positions are “ready to receive basic semantic values (individuals and relations)” that the relevant sentential constituents encode.<sup>33</sup> So the sentence ‘Aristotle is a philosopher’ resultantly generates the propositional structure  $\langle \_, \_ \rangle$  at where the slots designated by brackets are preserved for the semantic values of the sentential constituents, i.e. Aristotle himself and being jolly. Based on Russellianism, Millianism might endorse that empty-name sentences express propositional structures lacking some encoded semantic value in their argument positions. In this respect, ‘Santa is jolly’ expresses the structured but incomplete content  $\langle \_\_\_\_, \text{being jolly} \rangle$ .<sup>34</sup> In the literature, such contents structured as an ordered pair with an unfilled argument slot are coined as ‘gappy’ propositions.<sup>35</sup> In this context, many Millian philosophers adopt the notion of ‘gappy’ propositions as an alternative view to NPV for acquiring a more formal and traceable means to analyze the distinguishability, meaning, and truth conditions of what content empty-name sentences express. In short, the ‘gappy’ proposition view (GPV) about the empty-name sentences is a predominant way of addressing the semantic puzzles more directly with a distinct semantic construal of empty-name sentences.

In this respect, GPV and NPV agree on the Millian conclusion that empty-name sentences do not literally convey a proposition, yet they diverge from each other on how to work with the non-propositional status of these sentences. Their divergence is relatively straightforward: Empty-name sentences, to NPV, literally say nothing propositional, while these sentences, for GPV, literally express something with some degree of semantic significance or role. After all, NPV implies that empty names –as compositional constituents of the sentences in which they occur-have no semantic content to build a proposition altogether with every other compositional constituent of the sentences. Thus, empty-name sentences, for NPV, express no semantic object

<sup>29</sup> Mousavian, “The Varieties of Gappy Propositions,” 445.

<sup>30</sup> Fred Adams and Robert Stecker, “Vacuous Singular Terms,” *Mind and Language* 9, (1994): 387-40.; Adams, Fuller and Stecker, “The Semantics of Fictional Names,” 128-148.; Fred Adams and Laura Dietrich, “What’s in a (n Empty) Name?,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85, (2004): 125-148.; Fred Adams and Garry Fuller, “Empty Names and Pragmatic Implicatures,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37 (3), (2007): 449-461.

<sup>31</sup> Braun, “Empty Names,” 449-469.; David Braun, “Empty Names, Fictional Names, Mythical Names,” *Noûs* 39, (2005): 596-631.

<sup>32</sup> Braun, “Empty Names,” 460-465.

<sup>33</sup> Braun, “Empty Names,” 471.

<sup>34</sup> As Mousavian discusses in detail, there are varying opinions about how to represent such propositions formally in the most accurate way. Following Kaplan (1989), Braun (1993) originally represents ‘Vulcan’ with the empty set  $\{ \}$  in empty-name sentences while some others prefer to represent it with unbound variables such as ‘x’ or the propositional slot ‘\_\_\_\_\_’. See Mousavian, “The Varieties of Gappy Propositions,” 437-440.

<sup>35</sup> Just like the varying opinions about how to represent a gappy proposition, there are varying terms in the literature to coin it. In the literature, ‘gappy’ propositions are sometimes called as “unfilled”, “structurally challenged” or “incomplete”. For instance, Braun originally labels such propositions as unfilled propositions.

whatsoever. Hence, NPV seems to adopt an all-or-nothing approach to propositions, and thereby it holds that what is semantically conveyed by a sentence, if it conveys anything at all, is exclusively a proposition. Nonetheless, David Braun, a proponent of GPV, emphasizes that this approach seems disadvantageous for Millianism for a few reasons.

As he discusses, NPV mistakenly implicates that what sentences literally say has something to do with their intensional content only. However, it thereby omits that this intensional content is expressed within a specific compositional ordering in virtue of the sentential structure of a given utterance. In this respect, NPV does not allow empty-name sentences to represent any object at all. However, empty-name sentences have some other constituents with semantic values within a specific structure, even if empty names in them have no such values. Hence, Braun promotes GPV as a better alternative that “allows sentences containing empty names to express semantical objects that (at the very least) strongly resemble propositions” especially in terms of structure.<sup>36</sup> To illustrate, the sentences ‘Vulcan is a planet’ and ‘Mercury is a planet’ both produce a propositional structure having the one-place relation of a singular object, namely the structure  $\langle (), () \rangle$  at where brackets correspond to the semantic values of the relevant terms. However, the only difference is that the former sentence does not encode each semantic value of its structured parts.

Hence, GPV can be promoted to sort out the semantic puzzles for NPV in various ways. Braun, per se, defends that ‘gappy’ propositions are sufficient to function as bona fide propositions in terms of some propositional roles, such as bearing truth values or being an object of cognitive attitudes, although they lack a semantic value. On the other hand, some other Millian philosophers make use of GPV to promote their pragmatic maneuver to explain away why empty-name sentences do not semantically convey anything truth-evaluable while ordinary speakers’ intuitions indicate otherwise. That is to say, some Millian philosophers such as Adams and his co-authors appeal to the distinction between what is said and what is implicated to the effect that empty-name sentences semantically convey a ‘gappy’ proposition while their utterances might pragmatically convey complete propositions in which the unfilled argument positions are filled with a description or a set of descriptions that is causally and historically associated with the uses of the name in conversational discourse.<sup>37</sup> According to such accounts, ‘gappy’ propositions do not function as propositions in any semantic role, while uttering them provides the interlocutors sufficient input to infer complete propositions pragmatically based on interlocutors’ associations with the given names. For example, an utterance of the sentence ‘Vulcan is non-existent’ might pragmatically convey  $\langle \text{The tenth planet, being non-existent} \rangle$  depending on what the relevant interlocutor heard about the name ‘Vulcan’ and depending on where, when, and from whom she heard it. Just like each strategy covered so far, the GPV-based treatments to the NPV-related puzzles carry out their own puzzles for Millianism. As philosophers such as Everett (2000, 2003)<sup>38</sup>, Green (2007)<sup>39</sup> and Reimer (2001, 2007)<sup>40</sup> bring out, there is a significant amount of criticisms against GPV. To exemplify one intriguing debate about GPV, the NPV-related puzzle PI, for instance, also pose a threat to GPV accounts sin-

<sup>36</sup> Braun, “Empty Names,” 460-461.

<sup>37</sup> Adams and Stecker, “Vacuous Singular Terms,” 389-392.; Adams and Dietrich, “What’s in a (n Empty) name?,” 125-127.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Everett, “Referentialism and Empty Names” in *Empty Names, Fiction, and the Puzzles of Non-existence*, eds. A. Everett and T. Hofweber (CSLI Publications, 2000), 37-60.; Anthony Everett, “Empty Names and Gappy Propositions,” *Philosophical Studies* 116, (2003): 1-36.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell S. Green, “Direct Reference, Empty Names and Implicature,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37, (2007): 419-448.

<sup>40</sup> Marga Reimer, “The problem of Empty Names,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79, (2001): 491-506.; Marga Reimer, “Empty Names: Communicative Value without Semantic Value,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74(3), (2007): 738-747.

ce the sentences ‘Santa does not exist’ and ‘Sherlock does not exist’ indistinguishably express the same gappy proposition  $\langle \_, \text{non-existence} \rangle$ .

To wrap up, each strategy mentioned above demonstrates that Millianism does not necessarily entail the semantic puzzles from NPV. For one thing, someone can modify or amend the convictions behind NPV to develop another Millian account defending a distinct construal of the semantics of empty-name sentences. After all, Millianism austere stands for a direct referentialist theory on the semantics of proper names, while NPV, at best, is an extension of Millianism under specific considerations about reference failures, propositions, and semantic compositionality. Therefore, the semantic puzzles PM, PT, and PI do not necessarily and primarily pose threats to any Millian account of proper names.

### Conclusion

Admitting certain convictions about emptiness, propositionalism, and compositionality, Millianism ends up with NPV, which contends that empty-name sentences express no proposition at all. Thereby, NPV brings out three conclusions about the semantics of empty-name sentences- each of which does not jibe with ordinary speakers’ allegedly common linguistic intuitions on what empty-name sentences say. In this respect, any proponent of NPV, at best, might bite the bullet and advocates a systematic error in our linguistic intuitions about empty-name sentences. Even in that case, one must still accommodate her semantic stance with such intuitions by explaining away the roots of this systematic error. Nevertheless, such a task would require untenably arduous labor to break down our folk semantics since our intuitions about what an empty-name sentence means and truthfully conveys might diverge indeterminately based on varying epistemic, social, and psycho-linguistic elements. More importantly, the conclusions drawn by NPV would remain problematic irrespective of folk semantics since we seem to entertain empty-name sentences as the sensible tokens of conversational exchange, the cognitive contents of beliefs, and the logical objects of inferences without any ostensible lapse in such uses of these sentences. Hence, a proponent of NPV must still explain away these puzzles in terms of their epistemic, logical, and conversational aspects. As I have pointed out, there are many available strategies for Millian philosophers to accommodate these puzzles by shifting their perspective away from NPV. In this regard, it is common for Millian philosophers in the literature to tackle the underlying convictions behind NPV. In this spirit, philosophers such as Braun, Donnellan and Salmon seek to divorce Millianism from its extension NPV which constitutes a peculiar stance on the semantics of empty-name sentences under certain convictions about the genuineness of proper names, the plausibility of non-referring names, propositionalism, the nature of propositions, etc. Although such accounts might constitute semantic problems for Millianism in their own rights, they satisfactorily demonstrate that Millianism does not necessarily entail NPV and its semantic puzzles.

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