

# Millianism and the Problem of Empty Descriptions<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Empty names present Millianism with a well-known problem: it implies that sentences containing such names fail to express (fully determinate) propositions. The present paper argues that empty descriptions present Millianism with another problem. The paper describes this problem, shows why Millians should be worried, and provides a Millian-friendly solution. The concluding section draws some lessons about how all this affects Millianism and the problem of empty names.

*Keywords:* Millianism, empty names, descriptions, negative existentials, pretense.

## 1. Introduction

Given the continuing interest in the question of the semantic status of names and the impressive evidence for something like a Millian theory of names, the problem posed by non-referring or *empty* names is often thought to be among the most difficult and important problems currently facing philosophy of language. It is hard to disagree. Harder to accept, however, is the all-consuming focus on empty *names*. It can be shown, I think, that empty or non-referring definite descriptions give rise to a related problem on the most plausible theories of definite descriptions, including Russell's. Furthermore, this new problem is one that ought to concern Millians. For not only are Millians among the most ardent supporters of Russell's theory of definite descriptions (although not, of course, as applied to names), but this new problem also affects certain Millian-friendly descriptivist solutions to the problem of empty names (ones that uphold a Millian story about names but allow definite descriptions to do duty for empty names in problem contexts). In short, there is a problem of empty descriptions that is also a problem for Millianism. The present paper describes this problem, shows why Millians should be worried, and provides a Millian-friendly solution. The concluding section draws some lessons about how all this affects Millianism and the problem of empty names.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to many philosophers for their useful comments on ancestors of this paper. Special thanks to David Chalmers, Anthony Everett, and Alberto Voltolini.

## 2. Descriptions, negative existentials, and relative clauses

It is clear why empty names present a problem for Millianism. Millianism, after all, declares that the semantic content of a proper name is simply its referent, with sentences containing names expressing (structured) singular propositions that have the referents of these names as constituents. It follows almost right away that sentences containing empty names do not express propositions and so lack a truth-value—contrary to the seemingly *obvious* fact that sentences like ‘If Vulcan exists, then it is a planet’, ‘LeVerrier believed that Vulcan was a planet’, ‘My children expect Santa Claus to visit on Christmas eve’, and so on, say something true.<sup>2</sup> Consider in particular true negative existential statements like ‘Vulcan does not exist’ and ‘Santa Claus does not exist’. It is the absence of referents for ‘Vulcan’ and ‘Santa Claus’ that seem to make these statements true, yet Millianism claims that this very absence prevents them from saying anything true.

This problem—the ‘negative existential problem for names’—is just one of a spectrum of problems that together make up the so-called ‘problem of empty names’.<sup>3</sup> But it is widely regarded as among the most pressing for Millianism, and the problem that Millians are often keenest to target in their defense of Millianism. There is one solution in particular that I want to highlight. This is what I shall call the ‘descriptive-replacement’ solution, adopted by, among others, Ken Taylor and by Fred Adams and his co-authors.<sup>4</sup> These authors argue that Millians are right to deny that sentences containing empty names express (complete) truth-valued propositions, but take this to show that our intuitions about the truth-value associated with sentences containing empty names relate not to any propositions semantically *expressed* but to what utterances of these sentences pragmatically *convey*. The name ‘Santa Claus’, for example, might be

<sup>2</sup> Some Millians have recently become tempted by the view that many so-called empty names are not really empty but (on at least some prominent uses of these names) stand for special abstract objects. See especially Salmon 1998 and 2002, and, for some recent discussion, Caplan 2004 and Braun 2005. Note that Millians sympathetic to such a view do not extend it to the case of “empty” descriptions; the view is supposed to be a view about names only. If, however, there really is a problem of “empty” descriptions, as I argue in this paper, then some of the arguments for the claim that names like ‘Santa Claus’ and ‘Vulcan’ are not genuinely empty may suggest that many so-called empty descriptions are also not really empty—so much the worse for those arguments, in my view.

<sup>3</sup> Thus Braun (2005) talks of The Problem of Meaningfulness for Names, The Problem of Meaningfulness for Sentences, The Problem of Truth Value, The Problem of Attitude Ascriptions (a special case of the last problem), and The Problem of Belief and Sincere Assertive Utterance.

<sup>4</sup> See Taylor 2000; and Adams and Stecker 1994, Adams, Fuller and Stecker 1997, and Adams and Dietrich 2004. Although these authors all accept versions of the view, whose locus classicus is Braun 1993, that atomic sentences containing empty names express gappy propositions, there are significant differences between Taylor’s view and that of Adams *et al*, in particular with respect to the way associated descriptive propositions are generated. Note also that some Millians, notably Nathan Salmon, have argued for a *semantic* version of a descriptive solution to the negative existential problem for names (see Salmon 1998, esp. 303-304). As far as I can see, none of these differences affect what I have to say in this paper. For an excellent discussion and critique of descriptive solutions, see Everett 2003.

associated with the description ‘the jolly man who brings presents and lives at the North Pole’ and an utterance of ‘Santa does not exist’ might then pragmatically convey the claim that the jolly man who brings presents and lives at the North Pole does not exist. Our inclination to believe that a speaker speaks truly when she says ‘Santa Claus does not exist’ shows that we easily mistake what is pragmatically conveyed for what is expressed.

I will return to the descriptive-replacement solution to the negative existential problem for names in the next section. But first I want to make good on my claim that the logical behaviour of empty definite descriptions in some contexts exhibits difficulties that are very similar to the ones affecting empty names. I shall again focus on negative existential statements, this time negative existentials featuring definite descriptions (*descriptive* negative existentials for short).<sup>5</sup>

Consider the following two statements, and imagine them to be uttered assertively:<sup>6</sup>

- (1) The golden mountain—the only mountain to be mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends—does not exist.
- (2) The golden mountain does not exist; nor do any of the many other strange and wonderful objects mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends.

What is characteristic of these two descriptive negative existential claims is that they not only deny the existence of some object, in this case the golden mountain; they also describe this object in other terms, in this case as an object mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends. Call descriptive negative existentials that have this feature *classificatory*. Classificatory descriptive negative existentials like (1) and (2) strike (most of) us as perfectly coherent and, uttered in appropriate circumstances, as clearly true. It is not hard to see, however, that there is no consistent way of representing (1) in classical accounts of definite descriptions, such as Russell’s theory of descriptions or reasonable systems of free logic. Represented in such theories, statements like (1) and (2) turn out to be not just false but logically false. The reason is not hard to see. In order to represent (1), for example, it seems that we should represent ‘The golden mountain is the only mountain to be mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends’ as a conjunct of our representation of (1), since this sentence is logically implied by (1). But this component sentence is incompatible with another component sentence of (1), namely ‘The golden mountain does not exist’. If the latter is true, there is

<sup>5</sup> The argument is a simplified version of an argument first presented in Kroon 2009. The present version also responds to a number of criticisms.

<sup>6</sup> The reason for restricting our attention to assertive utterances of a sentence like (1) is that in such cases the logical role of a non-restrictive relative clause like ‘[which is] the only mountain mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends’ is particularly straightforward. If this sentence is uttered in compound constructions, however, there are complexities. In particular, it looks as if the relative clause dominates the main clause in such constructions. Thus, in the sentence ‘If the golden mountain—the only mountain mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends—does not exist, then Smith will win the bet’, the antecedent of the conditional is ‘the golden mountain does not exist’ and ‘The golden mountain is the only mountain mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends’ seems to function as a conjunct. The curious behaviour of non-restrictive relative clauses may suggest that we should understand their nature in other ways. (According to Potts 2005, especially chapter 4, they encode conventional implicatures.)

no unique golden mountain, in which case the affirmative sentence ‘The golden mountain is the only mountain to be mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends’ is false. This is so whether we adopt Russell’s theory of descriptions or a philosophical competitor to Russell’s theory like negative free logic.

Thus consider the way Russell would represent (1) when assertively used. On a Russellian analysis (1) contains as conjunct the affirmative identity sentence ‘The golden mountain is the only mountain to be mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends’:

(1a) (The golden mountain = the only mountain to be mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends) & the golden mountain does not exist.

But since for Russell the first conjunct (an identity sentence) requires that there *is* a unique golden mountain, while the second conjunct (a simple negative existential) requires that there is no unique golden mountain, this provides us with a blatantly inconsistent analysis of (1): in Russellian notation,

(1a<sub>R</sub>) (( $\exists x$ )(G!x & ( $\exists y$ )(S!y & x=y)) &  $\neg(\exists x)G!x$ ).

Inconsistency is not the only problem with (1a<sub>R</sub>). (1a<sub>R</sub>) also appears to misrepresent the logical grammar of (1). Take the non-restrictive relative clause in (1) (‘[which is] the only mountain ...’). This clause qualifies a single occurrence of the description ‘the golden mountain’, with the predicate ‘does not exist’ attached to this single occurrence. (1a) and (1a<sub>R</sub>), on the other hand, posit *two* occurrences of the same description, with the consequent eliminative analysis of these occurrences severing all connection between them. To get a reading that stays closer to the surface logical grammar of a claim like (1), we need to let ‘exists’ function as a genuine first-level predicate and use anaphora to refer back to the putative golden mountain, thus yielding something like:

(1b) The golden mountain = the only mountain to be mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends & *it* [this golden mountain] does not exist.

In Russellian form, letting the second occurrence of ‘the golden mountain’ in (1) be replaced by a variable bound by the quantifier in first occurrence:

(1b<sub>R</sub>) (( $\exists x$ )(G!x & ( $\exists y$ )(S!y & x=y)) &  $\neg Ex$ ).

(1b<sub>R</sub>) too is bound to strike us as an entirely unsatisfactory reading of (1), and for much the same reason as before. For Russell, the only acceptable reading of ‘E(xists)’ is as a universal predicate (*everything* exists),<sup>7</sup> so (1b<sub>R</sub>) is again inconsistent. That suggests a familiar alternative. Given that sentences like (1) and (2) imply that there is such a thing as the golden mountain, even if it is also said to be non-existent, we might construe (1b<sub>R</sub>) in a rather different way. Replace ‘ $\exists$ ’ and ‘ $\forall$ ’ with neutral, non-existentially loaded quantifiers ‘ $\Sigma$ ’ and ‘ $\Pi$ ’, ranging over a domain that encompasses both existent and non-existent objects, and let *E* be a discriminating predicate of existence. That way we get a consistent Meinongian reading of (1b):

<sup>7</sup> Russell is usually said to believe that ‘existence’ is not a predicate. That seems to me straightforwardly wrong since he must have known that in his logic ‘x exists’ can be represented as ‘( $\exists y$ )(x=y)’. What is true is that he thought that in statements of existence there is no substantive role for such a predicate. For evidence that Russell may also have held a version of this view, consider, for example, his claim in the lectures on Logical Atomism that “[i]f there were any fact of which the unicorn was a constituent, there would be a unicorn and it would not be true that it did not exist” (Russell 1956: 248).

(1b<sub>M</sub>) (( $\Sigma x$ )(G!x & ( $\Sigma y$ )(S!y & x=y)) &  $\neg Ex$ ).<sup>8</sup>

But if (1b<sub>M</sub>) is the most reasonable alternative reading of (1), it leaves Millians in an awkward position. For (1b<sub>M</sub>) not only contravenes the classical Russellian interpretation of the quantifiers, but also the way the theory of descriptions was, for Russell, supposed to help in the defense of a “robust sense of reality” designed to keep non-existent objects like unicorns and mythological mountains at bay.<sup>9</sup> And while Millians reject the descriptivist thesis that names are descriptions in disguise, they tend to support the theory of definite descriptions in its classic Russellian form, including its refusal to countenance genuine non-existents. They are not likely, then, to want to accept a reading like (1b<sub>M</sub>). But they also would not accept a reading like (1a<sub>R</sub>), since it is manifestly inconsistent.

Note that inconsistency is not peculiar to a Russellian treatment of definite descriptions in (1b). We get the same result if we adopt the kind of anti-Meinongian, anti-Russellian view of empty descriptions advocated by Mark Sainsbury in his *Reference without Referents* (Sainsbury 2005). On Sainsbury’s view, which is based on a version of Negative Free Logic (NFL), ‘The golden mountain does not exist’ is true just if the term ‘The golden mountain’ or ‘[The x: Gx]’ is empty. But if the term ‘[The x: Gx]’ is empty the identity claim ‘[The x: Gx] = [The x: Sx]’ is *false*, since in NFL all atomic affirmative sentences containing an empty term are false. It quickly follows that the sentence representing (1), ‘[The x: Gx] = [The x: Sx] &  $\neg E$  [The x: Gx]’ is necessarily false.<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that there are *no* consistent readings of (1) apart from the Meinongian one. There is one important candidate. We could opt for Ed Zalta’s abstract-object interpretation of talk about the non-existent.<sup>11</sup> Zalta acknowledges two distinct modes of predication: encoding and exemplifying. The golden mountain is an abstract object that *encodes* the properties of being golden and a mountain, but does not exemplify them. (Exemplification is the more familiar way of having properties; the encoding way is peculiar to abstract objects.) This object in turn *exemplifies*, but does not encode, such properties as being the only mountain to be mentioned in Smith’s book on myths and legends.<sup>12</sup> Assuming that the golden mountain does exemplify this property, it is indeed the only mountain to be mentioned in Smith’s new book. And because this object is an

<sup>8</sup> For a recent example of a theory of descriptions couched in terms of an extreme anti-Russellian, Meinongian view of the quantifiers, see Priest 2005.

<sup>9</sup> According to Russell, “Logic ... must no more admit a unicorn than zoology can; for logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology, though with its more abstract and general features. ... A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects” (Russell 1919: 47-48).

<sup>10</sup> We also get inconsistency, but in a different way, if we follow Potts 2005 in treating the content of the non-restrictive clause in (1) as a conventional implicature rather than as part of the semantic content of (1). For so construed, the relative clause still gives rise to an identity commitment, and whether this commitment is construed in Russellian terms or in the manner preferred by NFL, it will be false exactly when the remainder of (1)—the part expressing what Potts calls the ‘at-issue’ content—is true.

<sup>11</sup> See Zalta 1983, 1988.

<sup>12</sup> More precisely: being the only object to be mentioned in Smith’s new book that has the property of being a mountain, where ‘*having* property P’ ranges over exemplifying P and encoding P.

*abstract* object it does not have the property of physical existence. Hence (1) counts as true, not false, so long as we assume that existence in (1) is physical existence. (For Zalta, every object, whether abstract or not, belongs to the domain of quantification of the classical existential and universal quantifiers, and so has the trivial property of “logical” existence, definable from by the classical existential quantifier as  $\lambda x[(\exists y)(x=y)]$ . But for Zalta it is physical existence rather than logical existence that is at stake in a sentence like (1).)

Most Millians, I suspect, would resist this interpretation of (1). After all, it comes at a considerable a cost, both ontological (all the things said not to exist *do* exist, even if not as physical objects) and ideological (the solution comes with a controversial distinction between two modes of predication). The interpretation would certainly be anathema to those with broadly Russellian sympathies.

### 3. The Millian’s impasse

So there we have it: a familiar kind of descriptive negative existential that seems in its own way as embarrassing for a Millian, given what is likely to be her strong ideological commitment to Russell’s theory of descriptions, as a negative existential involving an empty name.

For some Millians, the problem strikes even deeper. We saw earlier that some Millians attempt to solve the negative existential problem for names by arguing that a speaker who utters a “true” negative existential like ‘Santa Clause does not exist’ pragmatically conveys a true proposition that is somehow salient enough to be the real focus when the speaker and her audience characterize the negative existential as true. But such a descriptive-replacement solution quickly becomes subject to the negative existential problem for descriptions. Suppose Mother says to Johnny: ‘Santa Claus does not exist’. On the descriptive-replacement solution, there is a salient true proposition that is thereby conveyed to Johnny, say the proposition that the jolly man who brings presents and lives at the North Pole does not exist. But suppose that Johnny seems unable to make the connection; such an item of news would be too hard to accept, so Johnny fails to grasp the appropriate descriptive association and hence the proposition. To drive the message home, Mother adds, as a reminder: ‘You know, the nice man you always write letters to at Christmas’. This provides Johnny with enough information to enable him to recall who Santa is: he is the jolly man who brings presents and lives at the North Pole. The message is now all too clear to Johnny, but so is the problem that this presents for any Millian who favours such a solution to the negative existential problem for names. For on its most reasonable interpretation, the pragmatically conveyed proposition that Johnny now succeeds in grasping says that the jolly man who brings presents and lives at the North Pole is the nice man he always writes letters to at Christmas; and this jolly man does not exist. Given the theory of descriptions, or even a free description theory based on NFL, this implies that the most reasonable interpretation of Mother’s complex negative existential renders it inconsistent.

The question is what the Millians should do about this problem of empty descriptions. Their options are limited. They will not want to reject Russell’s understanding of the theory of descriptions in favour of something more Meinongian in which the existential quantifier is no longer the *existential* quantifier, as in (1b<sub>M</sub>). Nor, if they are adherents of a system of free logic like NFL, will they want to change to a Meinongian-friendly version of free logic. And

they certainly should not argue that we must stop uttering statements like (1), on the grounds that such statements are philosophically confused. (If such statements are found to be philosophically confused and so unsayable, then so much the worse for the philosophy that finds them so.)

Should Millians, perhaps, back down on any initial distaste for Zalta's abstract-object interpretation of such sentences? After all, such an account provides readings that appear to be both consistent and anti-Meinongian, features that should impress Millians.<sup>13</sup> I am going to argue against any such move. This paper describes and motivates an alternative solution, one that is closer to Russell's in so far as it assumes his account of existence and his resolute repudiation of non-existent objects. The solution involves the thought that the kind of inconsistency displayed by (1) on its various inconsistent readings constitutes a quite general phenomenon, one that has nothing as such to do with existential statements and provides no succour for Meinongians. On the account I favour, the inconsistency of classificatory descriptive negative existentials like (1) is simply an interesting special case of this more general phenomenon.

I shall argue, in short, that Millians are free to accept (1b<sub>R</sub>) as an appropriate reading for a descriptive negative existential like (1), despite the inconsistency of this reading. (For the remainder of the paper, I shall assume Russell's account of descriptions as quantifiers, although the general strategy seems to be available to negative free logicians like Sainsbury as well.) The argument for the general claim that inconsistency provides no bar to such readings will occupy the next section of the paper. After this, section 5 returns to the particular case of claims like (1) and (2), and uses the framework of section 4 to show why the ensuing Millian-friendly solution to the problem of descriptive existentials should be preferred to an abstract-object solution. The final section of the paper returns us to the problem of negative existentials for proper names.

#### 4. Descriptive existentials and the role of pretense

To set the scene for the argument that is to follow, consider the following case. Suppose Jones claims to have discovered the golden mountain, contrary to Smith's often-repeated insistence that there is no such thing. Jones even displays what he calls 'irrefutable' photographic evidence for his claim, pointing to what seems to be a golden-coloured cone-shaped object at the top of one photograph. Smith's response is sarcastic:

- (3) The mountain that Jones recently discovered—the golden mountain, no less—has one notable property Jones failed to disclose: it is not golden.

(Imagine that Smith thinks that the golden colour in the photograph is due to a reflection of the sun on a perfectly standard granite mountain peak.) (3) presents us with the following problem. On the surface, it expresses a straightforward contradiction because the non-restrictive relative clause '[which is] the golden mountain ...' is in logical tension with the negated predicate 'is not golden'. But Smith clearly succeeds in saying something true and informative, so this inter-

<sup>13</sup> It should be said that Zalta's theory of objects has many other theoretical virtues, among them its ability to provide a new neologicist foundation for mathematics (Linsky and Zalta 2006). My concern here is limited to Zalta's well-known account of statements about non-existents.

pretation is unintended. The question is how to interpret the sentence in line with Smith's intentions.

The answer seems simple. In uttering the first part of (3), she pretends to go along with Jones's interpretation of the evidence—she is doing as if the latter's perspective on his discovery is correct, and she is acting as a kind of mouthpiece for Jones and this perspective. Smith *intentionally* mimics the way Jones represents his discovery, because her doing so is a staging post along the way to her saying, in a manner that deliberately mocks both the description and the describer, that it is a misrepresentation. (Indeed, it is easy to imagine this mimicking being continued, to the even greater irritation of Jones: 'Now that Jones has found the golden mountain', Smith might say, 'the fountain of youth surely cannot be too far away.')

If this is right, however, Smith's primary intention in uttering (3) cannot be to assert what (3) expresses, which is a contradiction. But how is her contradictory statement able to impart *any* kind of true, non-trivial information? Not surprisingly, given the role we have already assigned to Smith's doing as if Jones's interpretation of his discovery is correct, the notion of pretense will play an important role.<sup>14</sup> When Smith says that the mountain recently discovered by Jones—the *golden* mountain no less—is not golden, her words express a contradiction within her pretense. She thereby aims to exploit an interpretive tension that faces her audience, for no speaker is likely to want to assert a contradiction. What Smith's audience now understands is that her going along with the way Jones represented the world in his speech is a matter of pretense, not of belief, and that she is in fact disputing the aptness of the way Jones represented the world. She affirms that in reality it is *not* the case that the mountain recently discovered by Jones is golden.

In schematic form, this proposal—call it the *Pretense-Reality* proposal, or (PR)—says the following. Take the relevant core of a statement like (3) to be 'The A, which is B, is not C' (where being B entails being C). Such a statement is put to two rather different purposes by the speaker. First of all, the speaker asserts something from the perspective of her pretense: she *quasi*-asserts that the A is B. We might call this the *quasi*-content of her utterance of 'The A, which is B, is not C'. Secondly, she asserts something about how matters stand apart from the pretense: she asserts that it is *not* the case that the A is C. Call this the *real* content of her utterance.

To see how (PR) helps us to understand claims of non-existence, suppose that Smith's reasoning goes through a few more stages. Her claim (3) is first prompted by Smith's conviction that Jones's photograph features light playing on a granite mountain. She then develops a more radical view: Jones's photograph does not reveal a mountain at all—the thought that it does is caused by a perceptual illusion. This sequence of thoughts might be reported by Smith as follows:

- (4) The mountain that Jones recently discovered—the golden mountain, no less—is not golden at all. In fact, if you look closely enough you'll see that it does not even exist. Jones's mountain is a trick played by the light.

<sup>14</sup> See Walton 1990 for a seminal account of the ideas of pretense and make-believe, and their importance for understanding the nature of the representational arts.



Once again, this is a perfectly intelligible sequence of claims, even if the situation is unusual. But how should we characterise what is being said? (PR) suggests the following answer. First of all, note that Smith's use of (4) commits her to all of the following:

- (4i) The mountain that Jones recently discovered is the golden mountain.
- (4ii) The mountain that Jones recently discovered is not golden.
- (4iii) The mountain that Jones recently discovered does not exist.
- (4iv) The mountain that Jones recently discovered is a trick played by the light.

In what follows I'll focus on the first three sentences. (I take (4iv) to be some kind of explanatory metaphor, but will have nothing further to say about it.) As before, we can make sense of Smith's commitments by saying that Smith *quasi-asserts* that the mountain Jones recently discovered is the golden mountain (in virtue of (4i)), while she *really* asserts that it is not the case that the mountain Jones recently discovered is golden (in virtue of (4ii)). But note that this way of characterising the real content of Smith's utterance is scope-ambiguous. If the description is assigned wide scope relative to negation, it yields the claim that there is a unique mountain that Jones discovered last month, and it is not golden. But it also has a weaker narrow-scope reading: it is not the case that (there is a unique mountain that Jones discovered last month, and it is golden). At the point at which Smith uttered (3), she intended the stronger reading.

The possibility of a narrow-scope reading bears significantly on the nature and consequent usefulness of claims of non-existence. As in the case of (3), Smith's choice of words in uttering (4) shows that she is engaged in the pretense that Jones's interpretation of the evidence is correct. And as in the case of (3), it may appear that the real content contributed by (4ii) is the internally negated proposition that there is a unique mountain that Jones discovered, and it is not golden. But against the background of (4iii) Smith is clearly trying to deny that Jones succeeded in discovering *any* mountain, let alone a *golden* mountain, and so her assertion must be understood in more austere terms: at the point where she utters (4iii) she must be taken as asserting the externally negated proposition that it is not the case that there is a unique mountain that Jones discovered, one which has the property of being golden.<sup>15</sup>

How does Smith manage to get her audience to understand that this is the reading she intends? And how does (4iii) allow her to communicate her newfound belief that there is in fact no mountain that Jones discovered, let alone a *golden* mountain? To set the scene for an answer to these questions, notice that the standard Russellian account of (4iii) faces a version of the very problem that affected (1). In the context of (4), (4iii) is just a variant of the classificatory negative existential

<sup>15</sup> It is tempting to think that (3) involves something like a referential use of the definite description 'the mountain that Jones recently discovered', based on Smith's (quasi-) perceptual sightings of a mountain on Jones's photo. But there are closely related examples that do not involve reference to (quasi-) perceptual sightings. Imagine, for example, that Smith thinks that Jones simply made up the story about discovering a new mountain. Smith's claim 'The mountain that Jones recently discovered—the golden mountain no less—is not golden; it does not even exist; Jones never left his study, and made the whole story up' raises all the same issues.

(4iii') The mountain that Jones recently discovered—the golden mountain, no less—does not even exist.

Given the presence in (4iii') of the non-restrictive relative clause '[which is] the golden mountain', we can now appeal to the same kind of argument as we used in the case of (1b<sub>R</sub>) to argue for letting the description 'the mountain that Jones recently discovered' have wide scope in the analysis of (4iii'). And because in the context of (4), (4iii) is just a variant of (4iii'), this suggests that the best Russellian analysis of (4iii) also assigns wide scope to the description. That is,

(4iii<sub>R</sub>) There is a unique mountain recently discovered by Jones, and it does not exist. (In first-order notation,  $(\exists x)(J!x \ \& \ \neg Ex)$ .)

'E(xists)' is logically universal, however, and so (4iii) turns out to be inconsistent on its best Russellian analysis, just like (1). (As before, an analogous argument is available to those who, like Sainsbury, prefer to use NFL as their background logic.)

So in the context of (4) inconsistency affects not only (4ii) but also the negative existential (4iii). But how, in that case, should we understand what Smith says with her utterance of (4iii)? (PR) yields the following answer. To begin with, note that the use in (4iii) of the adverb 'even' ('does not *even* exist') implies—perhaps conventionally implicates—that the real content of Smith's utterance of (4iii) entails the real content of her utterance of (4ii): if Jones's mountain does not even *exist*, it certainly cannot be golden. This suggests that we should let the broad applicability of 'exists' explain the relationship between what is asserted with (4ii) and (4iii).

(PR) helps us to see how. We saw that, in the context of (4), (4iii) is a simple variant of (4iii'), so consider (4iii') again. Because 'exists' is (necessarily) universal, something's having a property B entails that it exists. So (4iii') can be understood as a degenerate case of a sentence subject to (PR), with B taken as the property of being uniquely a golden mountain and C being the property of existence. In that case, an utterance of (4iii') allows Smith to quasi-assert that the unique mountain recently discovered by Jones is the golden mountain, while at the level of real content she asserts that it is *not* the case that the unique mountain recently discovered by Jones exists. And much the same can be said about (4iii). It differs in not explicitly stating anything about the mountain in question, so we can understand its explicit commitments to be minimal: at the level of quasi-content, Smith says only that there is a unique mountain recently discovered by Jones, that the mountain recently discovered by Jones *exists*.<sup>16</sup> At the level of real content, however, nothing has changed. We can again take the real content of her assertion to be that it is not the case that the unique mountain recently discovered by Jones exists.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, in contexts where the description 'the A' is understood as having wide scope, 'The A does not exist' can be understood as a simple variant of the trivial classificatory negative existential 'The A, *which exists*, does not exist' (on this construal, '[which exists]' does not show up in 'The A does not exist' because it is logically redundant and hence elided). This again suggests that to articulate what is asserted with an utterance of a statement 'The A does not exist', when there is clear evidence that 'the A' is to be understood as having wide scope, we should treat it as a degenerate case of claims subject to (PR). (This is the explanation given in Kroon 2009. I now prefer the explanation given in the text.)

In principle, this statement of the real content of (4iii') and (4iii'') allows two possible readings: the description can be assigned wide scope or narrow scope. But this time we have no option. Because it is a priori true that *everything* exists, we cannot reasonably interpret Smith in accordance with the wide-scope reading, that is, as asserting the internally negated claim that there is a unique mountain recently discovered by Jones, and it *does not* exist. The only option, then, is to interpret Smith's utterance as having the corresponding externally negated claim as its real content:

(4iii)<sub>RC</sub> It is not the case that: there is a unique mountain that Jones recently discovered, and it exists.

Eliding the logically redundant clause 'and it exists', this finally yields:

(4iii)<sub>RC</sub> It is not the case that there is a unique mountain that Jones recently discovered.

Note that little more than the logic of 'exists' was needed to derive this account of the real content of Smith's utterance of (4iii) (so close, of course, to Russell's own statement of the *meaning* of a sentence like (4iii)). But it is enough to show why, after hearing (4iii), Smith's audience is not able to hear the real content of (4ii) as one in which 'the mountain recently discovered by Jones' is assigned wide scope. The wide-scope reading is ruled out by (4iii)<sub>RC</sub>. That was not true at the point where Smith uttered (3), since at that point she still thought that there was a mountain that Jones had recently discovered. Her only aim was to deny that this mountain was *golden*.<sup>17</sup>

## 5. Solving the negative existential problem for descriptions

By dividing the contribution made by an assertive utterance of an inconsistent statement like (2) or (3) into a quasi-asserted quasi-content and an asserted real content, (PR) gives us the material we need for a Millian-friendly solution to the negative existential problem for definite descriptions. What I have argued is that inconsistency is often just a spur to look beyond literal meanings to what the speaker intends to assert about the real world, against a background of propositions that the speaker entertains only in a spirit of pretense. Applied to the case of assertive utterances of (1) and (2), the lesson is that we can safely adopt an inconsistent reading like (1b<sub>R</sub>) for (1) (similarly for (2)), and then use (PR) to divide the (quasi and real) contribution made by such utterances.

Here is what we can say about the quasi-content of such utterances, and in what sense we can count this quasi-content as true. With the description 'the

<sup>17</sup> The account on offer is pragmatic rather than semantic. By contrast, philosophers in the Walton tradition (among them Crimmins 1998, Armour-Garb and Woodbridge 2015, and Everett 2013) hold that negative existentials involving names are true in some kind of extended pretense in which 'exists' is used as a discriminating predicate; what makes claims like 'Holmes does not exist' true in this pretense are certain meta-representational facts such as the referential failure of singular *Holmes*-representations. Arguably, such a view can be extended in a non-meta-representational way to descriptive negative existentials. On my view, however, we have no more reason to think that 'exists' is used in a special game-bound way in negative existentials than that 'golden' is used in a special game-bound way in (3). The interpretive tension found in each is enough to force us to recognise in these statements a claim about how things are pretended to be and a different claim about how things really are.

golden mountain' assigned wide scope, we should understand the speaker who assertively utters (1) as someone who is engaged in the pretense that all the names and descriptions used by Smith when describing the claims of various myths and legends genuinely denote objects; she thereby pretends that there exists a unique golden mountain, that there are unicorns, and so on. (As the words 'mentioned by Smith' make very clear, this is pretense involving the *terms* Smith uses. We should not assume that the speaker knows exactly what terms they are.) Facts about the world (in particular, facts about what Smith's book contains) then make certain other propositions fictional or true from the perspective of her pretense. In particular, we can suppose that the nature of the descriptions in this book make it fictional that the golden mountain is the only mountain among the objects mentioned in the book. Hence the quasi-content of the speaker's assertive utterance of (1)—namely, that the golden mountain is the only mountain mentioned in Smith's book on myths and legends—is true from the perspective of her pretense. At the same time, the real content of her utterance is also true, for what the speaker asserts apart from the pretense is that there is no unique golden mountain which exists, and hence that there is no unique golden mountain (a reading derived in the same way as (4iii)<sub>RC</sub>). On the view I have defended, what informs our sense that the speaker speaks truly when she utters (1), despite the fact that (1) is inconsistent, is the fact that she *quasi*-asserts something that is true in her pretense, and at the same time *asserts* something that is genuinely true.

The case of (2)—'The golden mountain does not exist; nor do any of the many other strange and wonderful objects mentioned in Smith's book on myths and legends'—is more tricky, but only because nothing has been said about the sorts of designators that might feature in Smith's book. To see why this is important, consider the way an abstract-object theorist might try to handle (2). She would say that the second part of (2) declares both that i) there are many strange and wonderful objects mentioned in Smith's book, including the golden mountain, and that ii) none of these exist (that is, none of them physically exist; all of them are abstract encoding objects). On such an account, as on traditional Meinongian accounts, any objects that do not exist are individuated in terms of their own specific set of properties, in this case the properties they encode. Thus assuming that (2) talks of the golden mountain, Zeus, the fountain of youth, and so on, (2) will be a way of stating in general terms that the following are all abstract encoding objects: the golden mountain, Zeus, the fountain of youth, and so on.

But this presents the abstract-object theorist with the following problem. Some of the designators that Smith uses in his book to designate his many "strange and wonderful" objects will be definite descriptions ('the golden mountain' and 'the fountain of youth', say), and some will be mythical proper names like 'Zeus'. Zalta has a well-developed story about the abstract objects designated by such terms, but it is important to note that they may not be the only sorts of terms we use when expressing claims of non-existence. We can imagine, for example, that Smith's book also contains numerous plural descriptions; consider, for example, the term 'wood nymphs' in 'The forests were filled with numerous cavorting wood nymphs'. We can suppose, as is surely likely, that the myth in question does not provide discriminating descriptions of each individual wood nymph, nor that it quantifies their exact number ('numerous' will be considered precise enough). The difficulty this generates is this. In uttering (2), the

speaker may be trying to affirm that there are no such things as the golden mountain, the fountain of youth, Zeus, unicorns, humans taller than tall trees, water dragons, wood nymphs, and so on. On the account I prefer, that is the upshot of the real content of the speaker's utterance of (2), which I take at a first approximation to be something like the following:

(2)<sub>RC</sub> Fictionally, there are many strange and wonderful objects that the terms in Smith's book on myths and legends denote / apply to. This includes 'the golden mountain'. But there is no (unique) golden mountain,<sup>18</sup> and in reality none of the terms in Smith's book that *fictionally* denote strange and wonderful objects denotes any object.

This account does not assume that the speaker can somehow discriminate in her pretense among the entities to which these various terms apply, or fix on their exact number. Despite this, the account is easily able to say why the real content of (2) may well be true. There are, after all, no golden mountains; no Olympian gods; no unicorns, humans taller than tall trees, water dragons, wood nymphs, and so on.<sup>19</sup> If, fictionally, the objects mentioned in Smith's book are of these various kinds (and of no other kind) and there are many such objects and they are all strange and wonderful, then the real content of (2) is true.

Faced with this uncertainty about the terms Smith uses, Zalta's account faces an obvious difficulty. There are no discriminable encoding objects corresponding to each of the numerous wood nymphs, so no sense can be made of the claim that none of the numerous wood nymphs exist. No doubt Zalta can make sense of the claim that the *collection* of wood nymphs exists as an abstract object (one that encodes the property of being a large set all of whose members are wood nymphs), or that the species/kind *wood nymph* exists as an abstract object (one that encodes the property of being a kind K such that, necessarily, all and only wood nymphs). Assuming Zalta's theory, these objects can then be said to be non-existent. But in affirming (2), these are not the kinds of objects whose existence is denied. (2) is used to deny the existence of individuals like Zeus, the golden mountain, all humans taller than tall trees, each and every wood nymph and water dragon, and so on, not just the existence of discriminable things and kinds like the golden mountain, Zeus, and the species *wood nymph*. (2) might even indicate this quite explicitly by adding something like: 'for example, none of the many cavorting wood nymphs featured in chapter 3 (charming creatures—I wish their creator had told us something more about each one of them)'.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> This metalinguistic way of describing the real content of an assertive utterance of (2) suggests that grasping the content presupposed an ability to use semantic ascent and descent on terms. But there may be other ways of describing the real content, say by appeal to there being properties associated with terms that, fictionally, pick out objects, and in reality pick out nothing.

<sup>19</sup> I assume that in each case we know properties whose instantiation is sufficient and necessary for there to be such objects. Where names and natural kind terms are concerned, causal descriptivism of the kind I favor tells one kind of story about such properties. Millians tend to be more guarded, either espousing a causal theory of some kind or invoking meta-representational properties (see, for example, Walton 1990 and Everett 2013).

<sup>20</sup> On the problem that non-discriminable fictional object present for a view like Zalta's, see, for example, Azzouni 2010. I should emphasise that the present kind of pretense

## 6. Back to Millianism

Earlier I pointed out that the negative existential problem for descriptions also affects the Millian-friendly *descriptive-replacement* solution to the negative existential problem for names, since the latter must hold that an utterance of a statement like ‘Santa Claus—you know, the nice man you always write letters to at Christmas—does not exist’ pragmatically conveys the problematic claim ‘The jolly man who brings presents and lives at the North Pole is the nice man you always write letters to at Christmas; and this jolly man does not exist’. On the view I have advocated, the problem that such a claim poses for both Russell’s theory of descriptions and a free description theory based on NFL is best tackled by acknowledging the role of pretense. On the basis of Mother’s engagement in a piece of existential pretense, she quasi-asserts that there is a unique jolly man who brings presents and lives at the North Pole, the same person, furthermore, as the nice man Johnny always writes letters to at Christmas. We can assume that this quasi-content is true from the perspective of her pretense. Having alerted Johnny’s attention to the first description by explicitly citing the second, she is now able to stand apart from the pretense, and declare that there is in fact no unique jolly man who brings presents and lives at the North Pole (the real content of her utterance, and a claim that is genuinely true, not just pretend-true).

There is, however, something rather disingenuous about such an account when presented in the context of the descriptive-replacement solution to the problem of negative existentials for names. After all, Millians who accept this solution do so because they think that a sentence like ‘Santa Claus does not exist’ fails to express a (complete) proposition, and so they try to capture our intuition that the sentence expresses a truth by descending to the level of associated descriptions. But if they are allowed to appeal to pretense to solve the resulting negative existential problem for descriptions, it is not clear why they should have bothered to descend to the level of descriptions in the first place when tackling the negative existential problem for names. They could simply have appealed to pretense at the level of *names*. Thus consider a speaker who pretends that she is successfully referring to someone with the name ‘Santa Claus’. From the perspective of this pretense, the speaker continues to be able to contemplate alternative ways of identifying the person designated with her use of ‘Santa Claus’ (for example, as the kind man Johnny writes to every Christmas). Furthermore, she is now able to entertain the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘Santa Claus does not exist’ (a fully fledged proposition, this time, although only from the perspective of the pretense—a *pretend-proposition*).<sup>21</sup> Pretense theorists think that Millians should focus on what speakers might be held to assert through their use of negative existentials when empty names are understood from this kind of pretend perspective; they should not focus merely on propositions in the descriptive neighbourhood of these negative existentials—especially not given the rather tenuous nature of the connection between these negative ex-

view of claims about the non-existence of non-discriminable objects like individual wood nymphs is consistent with the claim that the individual wood nymphs do not exist because the species *wood nymph* does not exist.

<sup>21</sup> Among prominent works that feature the idea of a pretend-proposition are Kripke 2013 and Walton 1990.

existentials and the descriptive claims that have been suggested by supporters of the descriptive-replacement solution.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly (given their general attachment to the Kripkean revolution in the philosophy of language), most Millian supporters of this kind of pretense theory argue that the real content of negative existentials involving names is given by non-descriptive claims: in the case of ‘Hamlet does not exist’, for example, the claim that singular *Hamlet* representations fail to refer (Everett 2013). It is important to emphasise, however, that Millians *need* not refuse a substantial role to descriptions in such cases. One reason why they might want to acknowledge such a role is that names and definite descriptions are often used in the same *kind* of negative existential construction (as in ‘Neither Zeus nor the golden mountain exists’), and on the surface it seems odd to have a radically disjunctive account of what such a sentence is used to say. But there is also a philosophically more weighty reason, although one that many Millians will contest. There is good reason, in my view, to think that speakers have a grasp of the conditions under which names refer, or fail to refer. Presented with various possible scenarios involving the use of a name, they will know which ones contain the referent and which do not (and which are borderline).<sup>23</sup> Assuming something like a causal-historical account of reference, that suggests that speakers have implicit knowledge of the causal-historical conditions under which a name successfully refers to an object, which in turn suggests that the right theory of reference-determination is in fact not strictly causal but causal descriptivist (even if the right theory of the semantic *content* of a name is not descriptivist at all, but Millian).

If so, the pretense account alluded to two paragraphs ago can be fleshed out as follows. In pretending that the Santa-Claus tradition is factual, the speaker pretends that the reference-determining condition underlying her use of a name like ‘Santa Claus’ (we can stipulate this to be something of the form: ‘the actual individual I am more or less reliably acquainted with under the name ‘Santa Claus’ as being such-and-so’) singles out a real person. What she then asserts when she declares that Santa Claus does not exist can be derived in the same way as (3iii)<sub>RC</sub>. It will be something like: It is not the case that there is a (unique) actual individual I am more or less reliably acquainted with under the name ‘Santa Claus’ as being such-and-so. This is true, and indeed necessarily true (given the rigidifying role of ‘actual’); to that extent, it is necessarily the case that Hamlet does not exist.<sup>24</sup> Millians, given their historical commitment to both

<sup>22</sup> Consider, for example, Everett’s objection that different speakers—and the same speaker at different times—are very likely to associate different descriptive contents with the same empty name (Everett 2003, 5.3). Adams and Dietrich respond to this and other worries in Adams and Dietrich 2004 (II.B), but in my view do not take the full measure of the worry (Kroon 2014). Not only can there be substantial variation among associated descriptions in the case of empty names, but such names are subject to a version of the problem of error—speakers can associate the wrong information with names because of misreading, mishearing or misremembering what was passed on to them.

<sup>23</sup> The locus classicus of this argument is Jackson 1998. I elaborate this argument in relation to the topic of negative existentials in Kroon 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Everett (2013: 72 fn. 45) criticises this account on the grounds that a) we do not hear negative existentials as making meta-representational claims, and b) it generates the wrong modal profile for a statement like ‘Holmes does not exist’ since it counts an utterance of ‘Holmes exists’ as true with respect to a world *w* in which, intuitively, Holmes

Russell's theory of descriptions and something like a causal theory of reference, should find such a conclusion congenial.<sup>25</sup>

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fails to exist but John Perry is called 'Holmes'. But a) and b) are based on a confusion. It is reference-determining properties that do the work, not the meta-representational property of being picked out by a reference determining property. And these are certainly not properties like *being called 'Holmes'*. On my account, they are best thought of as given by rigidified descriptions that (typically) appeal to causal-historical relationships or relationships of acquaintance.

<sup>25</sup> Note that such an account suggests that different speakers (and the same speaker at different times) assert different propositions when they utter the same negative existential 'N does not exist'. I attempt to resolve this problem in Kroon 2014. Other theories of negative existentials tend to inherit a version of this problem, and so will need their own way of dealing with the problem. (Everett, for example, writes that "utterances of 'Holmes does not exist' will carry the information that singular representations which count as referring to Holmes within the scope of the pretense fail genuinely to refer" (Everett 2013: 72), a claim that is centred on the pretense of a particular speaker.)



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