

Mill: “Of Names”

SUMMARY

What is a name?

Mill accepts Hobbes’s definition: “a word taken at pleasure to serve for a mark which may raise in our mind a thought like to some thought we had before, and which being pronounced to others, may be to them a sign of what thought the speaker had before in his mind.” (p. 284)

Names are names **of** things, and not merely of ideas.

Kinds of names: the three “grand divisions of names”

General vs. Individual (singular)

General: capable of being truly affirmed, in the same sense, of each of an indefinite number of things.

man, stone, soldier

A general name, for Mill, is what has come to be called a general term, e.g., *man*. Mill holds that a general name denotes, not a class of individuals, but each of the individuals in the class.

Thus, *man* does not denote the class of human beings, but each of: John, George, Mary, and all the other men.

A general term expresses certain qualities, but it does not denote them. It denotes the individuals that it can be truly affirmed of.

Individual: only capable of being truly affirmed, in the same sense, of one thing.

*John, William the Conqueror, the king who succeeded
William the Conqueror*

Notice that Mill treats proper names and descriptive phrases denoting a single object – what have come to be called ‘definite descriptions’ – alike in this respect: both are individual names.

Concrete vs. Abstract

Concrete: “stands for a thing.”

John, the sea, this table, man, white, old

Notice that some are singular and some are general. And notice the presence of *white*, which might not seem to be the “name” of a “thing”. Mill’s point is that *white* is predicated of things (‘this table is white’), not of attributes. (See p. 286.)

Abstract: “stands for an attribute of a thing.” Notice that some abstract names are singular and some are general.

Singular: stands for a single attribute “neither variable in degree nor in kind.”

milk-whiteness, visibleness, equality, squareness

Each of these denotes a single non-generic attribute. [There are not different species (i.e., more determinate forms) of squareness, or equality, etc.]

General: stands for a generic attribute, one that is “variable in degree or in kind.”

color, whiteness, magnitude, old age

Color names a general attribute, since it applies to various colors; *whiteness* names a general attribute, since it applies to various shades of white.

Connotative vs. Non-connotative

Connotative: “denotes a subject and implies [Mill later says ‘connotes’] an attribute.”

White denotes each white thing, and connotes the attribute of whiteness.

Man denotes each man, and connotes the attribute of humanity.

“All concrete general names are connotative.” (p. 286, right)

Non-connotative: “signifies a subject only, or an attribute only.”

Concrete: *John, London, England*

Abstract: *Whiteness, length, virtue*

Individual concrete names

Proper names

Paul, Caesar, Dartmouth

They are non-connotative. A proper name denotes an individual and connotes no attribute. It has no signification.

“The only names of objects which connote nothing are *proper* names, and these have, strictly speaking, no signification.” (p. 288, left)

And Mill adds (in a passage omitted from the excerpt in our book):

“A proper name is but an unmeaning mark which we connect in our minds with the idea of the object, in order that whenever the mark meets our eyes or occurs to our thoughts, we may think of that individual object.”

Definite descriptions

Mill does not use this term. Rather, he talks of “individual concrete names that connote an attribute as well as denoting an individual.”

God, the sun, the first emperor of Rome, the author of the Iliad, the present Prime Minister of England

Hence, when singular terms (“individual concrete names”) “convey any information” or “have any meaning, the meaning resides not in what they *denote*, but in what they *connote*.” (p. 288)

Denotation vs. Connotation

Roughly: denotation = reference, and connotation = meaning.

In the case of a general term (“concrete general name”), it **denotes** all of the **things the term applies** to (is “true of”), and **connotes** the property or **attribute** that all those things have in common, in virtue of which the term applies to them.

Thus, *man* connotes the attribute of humanity, and denotes (severally) Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Clinton, etc.

COMBINATIONS AND PERMUTATIONS

How do these three grand divisions intersect? There are eight possible combinations, but one of those is empty.

General Concrete Connotative	<i>white, man, virtuous</i>
General Concrete Non-connotative	none
General Abstract Connotative	<i>fault (= bad quality)</i>
General Abstract Non-connotative	<i>color, whiteness</i>
Singular Concrete Connotative	<i>the first emperor of Rome, the author of the Iliad</i>
Singular Concrete Non-connotative	<i>Paul, Caesar, Dartmouth</i>
Singular Abstract Connotative	[Mill doesn't say.]
Singular Abstract Non-connotative	<i>visibleness, equality, squareness, humanity</i>

COMMENT

Note that an unambiguous general term connotes exactly one thing (a certain attribute), but denotes a (possibly indefinite) number of things. *Man* does not denote the set of men (where that set is considered a unity); rather, it severally denotes **each of the members of that set**.

Mill insists that **denotation does not determine connotation**. That is, given a list (even a complete list) of the denotation of a term, you cannot retrieve its connotation:

“It is even possible that I might know every single individual of whom a given name could be with truth affirmed, and yet could not be said to know the meaning of the name.” (p. 288)

He does not say (although it is quite consistent with what he says) that connotation determines denotation. His discussion of the “mischief” caused by “using connotative terms without a distinctly ascertained connotation” (not included in the excerpt in our anthology) certainly suggests this. The idea seems to be that without a precise connotation, we are forced to classify things “on no other principle than that of superficial similarity.” Presumably, a term with a precise connotation would leave no room for deviation or creativity in application to new cases — if we know exactly what a term connotes, there will be no question whether it does or doesn’t apply to new putative cases.

CRITIQUE

Mill’s account leaves some important questions unanswered:

Understanding

How do we **understand** a sentence? Presumably it is the **connotation**, rather than the denotation, of a term that the mind grasps. Certainly, this is the way he would account for our understanding of a general term: one grasps the property of whiteness (the connotation of *white*), not all of the members of the class of white things (which together constitute the denotation of *white*).

How, then, do we understand a sentence containing a proper name (singular **concrete** non-connotative name)? For on Mill’s account, proper names have no connotation. So there doesn’t seem to be anything for the mind to grasp. What contribution, then, can a proper name make to the meaning of a sentence in which it occurs?

One may usefully contrast this problem with a related, but different, one: how do we understand a sentence containing a singular **abstract** non-connotative name, such as *squareness* or *humanity*? Presumably, we must be able to directly grasp the thing named, i.e., the attribute of squareness or humanity, for it was by appeal to such a grasp that Mill explains how we are able to understand the corresponding (concrete connotative) general terms *square* and *human*.

This second problem is soluble because the things named in this case are **attributes**, and hence directly accessible to the mind. So the moral seems to be: we understand a non-connotative term by having a direct mental grasp of the entity it names. But whereas attributes seem to be directly mentally graspable, “things” (like Socrates, Clinton, etc.) do not.

Determining the reference of a name

How do we manage to do this? How does anyone know **who** or **what** someone is referring to by a given use of a name? If a name is just a label to be applied to an object, how can I understand a sentence that contains a name I’ve never heard before, or that contains a name that labels an object I’ve never experienced?

How can identity statements be significant?

This was Frege’s original puzzle, and the motivation for providing senses for proper names. Since Mill’s theory holds names to lack connotation (roughly equivalent to Frege’s sense), how can he account for the cognitive significance of identity statements?

How can we use a name to raise an existence-question?

Consider the question “Does *N* exist?” Can this question be meaningfully asked when ‘*N*’ is replaced with a proper name? (Cf. Wittgenstein, *Inv.* § 79); Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Lecture I [portion not excerpted in our anthology].)

Suppose I ask “Did Moses exist?” If we suppose that *Moses* is a meaningless label that has been applied to Moses, how can I ask this question? If I know to whom the label has been applied, the answer is automatically ‘Yes’. If I don’t know to whom it is applied, what am I asking? Who am I asking about? It would seem that on Mill’s account of proper names, I cannot even understand the question.

Such considerations have led philosophers to propose alternative accounts of proper names. We have, in fact, already looked at the two most prominent of those: the accounts of Frege and Russell.

But, perhaps surprisingly, a conception of naming that is much closer to Mill’s has become much more prominent in the past 35 years. We will turn next to the philosopher whose work is mainly responsible for this Millian revival—Saul Kripke.