

BOOK REVIEW: PREDELLI, S. *Proper Names: A Millian Account* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, ix+165)

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ABSTRACT

In this review I discuss Stefano Predelli's book *Proper Names: A Millian Account*. The book provides a defense of the traditional Millian view according to which proper names are non-indexical, rigid devices of direct reference. In addition, Predelli discusses (and discards) some usual interpretations as misconceptions and it contests many common objections. I provide an overview of its chapters and consider some of its strengths and weaknesses.

On his most recent book, *Proper Names: A Millian Account* (2017, OUP p. 165), Stefano Predelli pursues a defense of the traditional Millian thesis that proper names are non-indexical, rigid devices of direct reference. As he announces at the introduction, his strategy is not to argue directly in favor of the view but to provide a cogent presentation thereof, delimit its scope, dispel its most common misinterpretations and find its place into a wider picture concerning extra-semantic regularities and language use, especially with regard to the role played by a name's origin and its articulation. The book focuses mainly in 'referential'

uses of proper names, that is, bare occurrences of proper names in argument position, although considerable attention is paid to predicative uses in some of the last chapters (negative existentials and indirect reports are left aside). The final chapter, somewhat isolated from the previous ones, discusses several subtleties with regard to the occurrences of proper names within works of fiction and presents a novel theory concerning fictional names.

In the first chapters Predelli lays the ground for the rest of the book. Chapter 1 (Preliminaries) covers familiar ground. The author presents a simple indexical intensional language along kaplanian lines, which allows him to perspicuously distinguish between definite descriptions, indexicals and proper names in terms of their behaviour with respect to contexts and points of evaluation (Kaplan's circumstances of evaluation). There we find a characterization of names as non-indexical, rigid terms of direct reference. In other words, proper names are characterized as endowed with a constant character (a character which, unlike that of indexicals, outputs the same intension at every context) and a constant intension (an intension which, unlike that of definite descriptions, outputs the same extension at every point of evaluation), together with the idea that sentences containing proper names express *singular* propositions.

The next two chapters (2 and 3) have two main aims: i) to depict a pre-semantic picture about how to represent uses of expressions, specially proper names and ii) to place the account within a wider view concerning the way in which *uses* of expressions impart information by virtue of extra-semantic regularities. As for the former, Predelli introduces the idea of an *expression*, namely a term endowed with a syntactic category, a phonological and/or orthographical articulation, and a character, *viz.* a certain truth conditional contribution. He characterizes articulations as abstract types which can be exemplified by tokens of them, although tokening an articulation does not suffice for bringing up an

expression. In order to legitimately represent a token of an articulation as a *use* of an expression (represented as an expression-context pair, $\langle e, c \rangle$) the former has to take place in an appropriate *setting*, which includes the choice of language, the intentions of the speaker, the expectations of the audience and so on. Thus, a single token of a given articulation can be represented in different ways, but it is only once you choose to represent it as a use of a specific expression (hence as endowed with specific semantic features -e.g. a given character) that semantic evaluation comes into the picture.

To complete his view on the pre-semantics of proper names Predelli presents the basics of what he denominates launching episodes. In typical cases ('smooth' cases) a launching episode involves a launching device (namely an articulation), a launching target and launcher with certain intentions, e.g. the intention to create a new word instead of conforming to prior usage. In addition, certain social facts might be required to hold (although not necessarily), like the launcher being in a position of authority and such. Once a launching has taken place in which a certain articulation is conventionally associated with an individual, there can be replicating episodes, i.e. tokens which defer to the original launching episode involving that very articulation as the source from which they inherit their semantic features. The way a given token of an articulation is represented depends on the launching episode on which it rests. Importantly, when a token is appropriately connected with a certain launching episode, it is not merely a token of an articulation but a token of an *expression*, endowed with a certain syntactic category and character. The important thing for the Millian is then that 'the inner mechanisms of a replicating episode play a *clearly pre-semantic role*, namely that of justifying the representation of a certain episode of speaking in terms of an expression-context pair.' (Predelli 2017, p. 60) (my emphasis)

With regard to ii) Predelli elaborates on a distinction which will be central for the rest of the book, between the evaluation of an expression *at* a context and the use of an expression *in* a context. A semantic theory, he claims, should be able to evaluate a given expression w.r.t contexts in which such expression has not been used, as it should become clear by paying attention to sentences like ‘Nobody is speaking’. In light of this, he claims that we must distinguish between the class of all contexts, which is relevant for drawing conclusions about character, and the restricted class of contexts *of use*, which is not. To take the previous example, ‘Nobody is speaking’ is false in every context of use but, according to Predelli it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that it is false by virtue of its character since there are contexts in which such sentence is true, namely those in which no expression is used. Once this distinction has been drawn, Predelli puts forth the idea of *settlement*:

An expression e settles the sentence S iff $\text{true}_c(S)$ for all $c \in \text{CU}(e)$ ¹.

which is employed later in the book to account for several phenomena allegedly problematic for Millianism. The general idea is that some contents are neither encoded in the character nor conveyed by means of traditional pragmatic mechanisms (e.g. conversational implicatures) but *imparted* by virtue of extra-semantic regularities concerning various features of an expressions’ type of use, articulation, origin, etc.

Unsurprisingly, uses of proper names have results of settlement: as with any other expression, on top of encoding a certain truth conditional contribution a use of a proper name imparts some information by virtue of extra-semantic regularities pertaining to its use. By way of illustration: a use

¹ Since every sentence which is true by virtue of character is also settled, Predelli introduces the notion of *mere* settlement, which applies only to sentences which are not true by virtue of character alone.

of the name ‘Pablo’ (namely the tokening of an articulation as an expression endowed with a certain character, the constant function which outputs Pablo at every context) for example, settles ‘Pablo bears ‘Pablo’’, i.e. for every $c \in CU(Pablo)$ it is true at c that Pablo bears ‘Pablo’. Allegedly, by appealing to these kind of considerations one is able to account for traditional problems regarding cognitive value, like the difference between ‘I am Pablo’ and ‘Pablo is Pablo’. On his view, both sentences encode identical truth conditional contents, but uses of the former additionally *impart* the information that the agent of the context bears ‘Pablo’, while uses of the latter do not. *Mutatis Mutandis* for ‘Cicero is Cicero’ and ‘Cicero is Tully’: while they both encode the same truth conditional content, uses of the latter impart the information that the bearer of ‘Cicero’ is also a bearer of ‘Tully’, while uses of the former do not. This encourages Predelli to conclude that

...appeals to cognitive value as the starting point for semantic inquiry are, at best, foolhardy. More fundamentally reckless is the attitude according to which cognitive value is primarily a property of expressions, rather than of uses and users—an attitude that makes it almost inevitable to look for character and/or content-based peculiarities behind the intuitive discrepancy between, say, ‘Cicero is Cicero’ and ‘Cicero is Tully’. (Predelli 2017, p. 68)

Now, besides regularities involving the use of expressions, the author highlights several social conventions surrounding the articulations allowed in authorized launching episodes, e.g. the convention that /Alice/ is an articulation reserved for women. Predelli calls the class of these conventions an *onomastic*, and claims that uses of proper names can be said to impart information w.r.t. a given onomastic in force. In other words, a use of the proper name ‘Alice’ (that we represent $\langle Alice, c \rangle$) settles^o ‘Alice is a

woman’, that is, for every $c \in \text{CU}^o(\textit{Alice})$ (the contexts of use consistent with the onomastic θ), ‘Alice is a woman’ is true at c . Predelli pushes the strategy even further: in addition to regularities of use, like the fact that whenever a name is used a given articulation is tokened, and regularities pertaining to onomastics, like the fact that a certain name it is typically reserved for women, there is encyclopaedic knowledge concerning the circumstances of some launchings which might become more or less widespread among a community. Thus, phenomena which, some have argued, ought to be explained by resorting to the cognitive import of proper names, like the non-triviality of a sentence like ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’, can be accounted for within this framework as information imparted by their *uses*. More specifically, the information that the evening star is the morning star is imparted^e by uses of ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ (i.e. ‘the evening star is the morning star’ is true for every $c \in \text{CU}^e(\textit{Hesperus is Phosphorus})$ -the class of contexts of use consistent with the encyclopaedic knowledge surrounding those names which is widespread within a community), but it is not imparted^e by uses of ‘Hesperus is Hesperus’.

This extension of the notion of settlement in order to account for intuitions concerning cognitive value is perhaps one of the most controversial points on Predelli’s account. On the one hand, the author places settlement results within the field of pre-semantics, unlike other non-semantic mechanisms as conversational implicatures, which arguably take place at a pos-semantic level (see Predelli 2017, p. 69). However, settlement^o and settlement^e results seem to be a pos-semantic business. To be sure, results of settlement are unavoidable: once you decide for a representation of a token of /Alice/ as a use of the name ‘Alice’ -<Alice, c >- (e.g. after a use of the sentence ‘Alice prunes in June’) impartation effects like ‘a proper name is being employed’ and ‘Alice bears ‘Alice’” follow straightforwardly, in consonance with its alleged pre-semantic nature. By contrast, even after you choose to represent a token of /Alice/ in ‘Alice prunes in

June' as a use of the proper name 'Alice' you can either infer that 'Alice is female' *or* that the use is not consistent with the onomastic in force in the community. Put differently, 'Alice bears 'Alice'' follows straightforwardly from the fact that the proper name 'Alice' was used and from that fact alone, while 'Alice is female' seems to be just something you are *allowed to infer* in virtue of the fact that 'Alice' was used *plus* some of your background beliefs or knowledge, such as the defeasibly justified belief that the launching of the name conformed to a given onomastic. The point is even stronger when it comes to encyclopaedic knowledge. The encyclopaedic information surrounding the launching of 'Hesperus' does not seem to be something imparted by the use of the name by virtue of some of its pre-semantic features, but just general knowledge which comes to mind whenever the name is used. Of course one has the right to call all these different ways of conveying information settlement or impartation, but it seems plausible that standard settlement results work quite differently from settlement^o and settlement^e ones: the former are plausibly pre-semantic while the latter are arguably not. If this is correct, despite appearances Predelli does not provide a uniform account for results concerning cognitive value of proper names.

Another aim of the book is to dispel some very common but (according to Predelli) erroneous interpretations of Millianism. One of them is the view that for Millians names are arbitrary and unstructured 'tags'. On Predelli's view, this is just a misconception: a Millian should be ready to admit that some names like 'Goldman' or 'Outline of a theory of truth' are both complex and motivated; as long as their truth conditional idleness is acknowledged, Millianism is perfectly consistent with these facts. Another common view is that according to Millianism co-referential names are synonymous. By contrast, Predelli argues that Millianism is consistent with a name's meaning reaching beyond its truth conditional import (Chapter 5). To show this the author picks up on previous work (see *Meaning Without truth*, OUP

2013) in order to distinguish both impartation and character from a third dimension of meaning, the *bias*. In a nutshell, the *bias* is just genuinely non-indexed settlement: a kind of conventional restriction on appropriate contexts of use which is not constrained to this or that type of use (face-to-face conversation, answer machines, etc.) In light of this, the *bias* of an expression differs from imparted contents in that it is a part of *conventional* meaning, but it also differs from character in that it is a *non truth conditional* dimension of meaning.

With regard to this point, one might wonder whether the ‘genuinely non-indexed settlement’ definition offered by Predelli really captures the difference between impartation and bias. After all, some allegedly imparted contents are arguably settled for every context of use, e.g. ‘There exist, existed or will exist intentional agents’. This point is important because it is supposed to mark the distinction between the pre-semantic level (settlement) and the semantic (although non truth conditional) one. How do we differentiate contents presumably imparted in every context of use by virtue of extra-semantic regularities pertaining to their use from contents presumably imparted in every context of use by virtue of conventional meaning?

Be that as it may, once Predelli’s view about *bias* is assumed it is clear that co-referential names might have different *bias*, hence fail to be synonymous. For example, one can imagine a name ‘Alice’ and a nickname ‘Ally’ which co-refer, though appropriate uses of the latter are conventionally constrained to informal contexts (or contexts in which the speaker is familiar with the audience) while appropriate uses of the former are not.

In chapters (6 and 7) Predelli discusses the repercussions for Millianism of some hypothesis concerning proper names which have received much discussion in recent literature. Specifically, he examines the determiner hypothesis, according to which proper names in argument position are syntactically flanked by a determiner, and the predicate

hypothesis, which maintains in addition that names are predicates (thus they express a non-constant intension). He finds both consistent with the main Millian tenets.

Concerning the former, the author argues that the Millian can afford it just by making some non-problematic assumptions: she just has to understand the proper name as encoding a non-indexical character and a constant intension with a singleton as its value $\{\{Alice\}_c = Alice\}$, while analyzing the determiner as an expletive element. Concerning the latter, Predelli claims that contrary to what supporters of the predicate hypothesis assume, allegedly predicative uses of proper names (e.g. Burge-like examples like ‘Some Alice are crazy, some are sane’) do not contain occurrences of proper names in the sense adopted in the book but tokens of name-like articulations unrelated to any launching episode from which to inherit any semantic feature. Put differently, they ought not be represented as $\langle \text{‘Alice’}, c \rangle$, hence they do not express full-fledged sentences appropriate for truth conditional conclusions. If this is correct, appeals to uniformity by defenders of the predicate hypothesis are biased against Millianism.

Another typical argument put forward (in this case by nominal descriptivists) against Millianism resorts to the trifling or trivial character of sentences like ‘Socrates is called /Socrates/’. Predelli claims that he is able to provide a non-semantic explanation consistent with millian commitments: a use of ‘Socrates is called /Socrates/’ involves a tokening of the articulation /Socrates/, moreover, it involves a use of that articulation *as a specific name* (a use representable as $\langle \text{‘Socrates’}, c \rangle$, where $Socrates = \langle NAME, /Socrates/, \{Socrates\} \rangle$); as a result the sentence is settled, that is, it is true for every $c \in CU(Socrates\ is\ /Socrates/)$, which is what explains its apparent triviality. An additional consideration reinforces the point: in Predelli’s account the same broad mechanism concerning information imparted by use-regularities explains the trifling character of ‘Socrates is called ‘Socrates’’ and that of ‘Horses are called /Horses/’,

while nominal descriptivists need to somehow differentiate the two cases (the explanation for the former is said to be semantic while the explanation for the latter is not).

Predelli's rendition of the disputed sentence as 'Socrates is called /Socrates/' is not uncontroversial, though. Some philosophers have argued that 'Socrates is called /Socrates/' and 'Socrates is called Socrates' are both grammatical and mean different things (see for example Fara 2011. See also Matushansky (2008), who presents syntactic evidence that the some constructions involving 'called' include a small-clause in which 'Socrates' is not quoted but it enters the syntax as a predicate). The former means that people use /Socrates/ to address Socrates or to refer to him. The latter, however, attributes to Socrates a property, that of having 'Socrates' as a name (a property which he might have even though he was never addressed by means of the articulation /Socrates/). It is arguably the latter interpretation the one that triggers the intuition of triviality, not the former: it is perfectly possible that no one ever addressed Socrates by means of /Socrates/. If this were correct, it becomes unclear whether Predelli's response strategy works: although one could argue that both 'Socrates is called /Socrates/' and 'Socrates is called Socrates' are true in every context of use, it is not clear whether the latter is true by virtue of its character –it depends on what you think about the character of the predicate Socrates.

The last Chapter is devoted to occurrences of names in works of fiction, myths, literary criticism, etc. Predelli advocates the No Name Hypothesis, according to which occurrences of names within works of fiction are not, properly speaking, occurrences of proper names; they are occurrences of mere name-like articulations in a setting which precludes their being full-fledged expressions apt for semantic representation (a view that applies to the sentences which contain them too, for obvious reasons). In other words, they are merely fictional names. As a consequence, they encode no content, and only fictionally impart some

information (which is nevertheless available to us) like the content that a name-like articulation is being tokened.

To Sum up: Proper Names: A Millian Account presents a novel and original defense of Millianism which is very welcomed in light of the recent re-emergence of descriptivism. In addition to developing a coherent and comprehensive presentation of Millianism, the book further motivates the view by framing it into a bigger picture concerning language use, it makes efforts toward clarifying its scope and limits and it provides novel responses to many arguments recently put forward in the literature on proper names. Despite its many controversial claims, it undoubtedly makes a great deal in moving the debate forward. It is a highly recommended read for anyone with an interest in semantics and philosophy of language and a mandatory one for anyone working on proper names.

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