Truths Containing Empty Names
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Abstract. On the Direct Reference thesis, proper names are what I call ‘genuine terms’, terms whose sole semantic contributions to the propositions expressed by their use are the terms’ semantic referents. But unless qualified, this thesis implies the false consequence that sentences containing names that fail to refer can never express true or false propositions. (Consider “The ancient Greeks worshipped Zeus”, for instance.) I suggest that while names are typically and fundamentally used as genuine terms, there is a small class of names, which I call ‘descriptive names’, whose reference is fixed by commonly associated definite descriptions, and I also suggest that there is an idiom of natural language on which such names can be used as abbreviated definite descriptions in a limited set of sentential contexts, including (1) positive and negative existentials, (2) cognitive ascriptions, and (3) uses of names to talk about myth. Uses of empty descriptive names in such contexts can then be either true or false. Relying on Gregory Currie’s theory of truth in fiction, I also propose an idiom on which fictional names can be used as short for a certain type of description in talk about fiction. Along the way, I provide arguments that names are used as short for descriptions in substantive existential statements as well as in both metamythic and metafictive contexts. I also discuss and criticize alternative views of these matters, including the views of David Braun, Saul Kripke, Peter van Inwagen, and others.

Key words: proper names, names, direct reference, reference failure, existence, fiction, myth, reference, semantics