

A PERSISTENT DESCRIPTIVIST REPLY TO AN OBSTINATE MODAL ARGUMENT

ABSTRACT

Kripke's modal argument suggests that names are not semantically equivalent to non-rigid descriptions, but it does not imperil a rigidified descriptivist theory of names. A revised version of the modal argument attacks even rigidified descriptivism by arguing that names exhibit a different kind of rigidity than do rigidified descriptions – names are *obstinately* rigid while rigidified descriptions are *persistently* rigid. The revised modal argument thus purports to show that names are not semantically equivalent to rigidified descriptions. Descriptivists and anti-descriptivists typically agree that rigidified descriptions are persistently rigid, but I argue here that it should also be common ground that names are persistently rigid. As a result, names and rigidified descriptions have the same modal status after all, and so the revised modal argument will fail to establish the semantic inequivalence of names and rigidified descriptions.

KEYWORDS

Content; Descriptivism; Direct Reference; Names; Rigid Designator; Semantics.

§0 The Modal Argument and Rigidified Descriptivism

There persists a debate about whether natural language names are semantically equivalent to definite descriptions, or whether instead names are directly referential. The descriptivist view has been famously attacked through multiple arguments by Kripke (1980). I want to consider here one of those arguments, the modal argument. The modal argument in its original form is not decisive against all forms of descriptivism, but there have been attempts to reformulate the argument that appear to be more comprehensive. This appearance is illusory – though descriptivism may in the end be unsatisfactory, even the more recent versions of the modal argument fail to discredit descriptivism.

Kripke's original version of the modal argument claims that names in natural language are rigid designators, but definite descriptions are [typically] non-rigid. If names and definite descriptions have different modal profiles, they are ipso facto semantically inequivalent. But a

descriptivist might agree with Kripke that natural language names are rigid,¹ while proceeding to argue that names are simply equivalent to *rigidified* descriptions. The description ‘the teacher of Alexander the Great’ non-rigidly designates Aristotle, but we can create a rigid description of Aristotle by actualizing the description: ‘the *actual* teacher of Alexander the Great’.

This use of the actuality operator as a rigidifier presupposes a piece of two-dimensional modal semantics. Ordinary one-dimensional semantics holds that we evaluate a content at a world of evaluation and thereby determine an extension; two-dimensional semantics holds that we evaluate a content with respect to a *pair* of parameters to determine an extension. In the case at hand the two parameters will be the actual world in addition to the world of evaluation carried over from one-dimensional possible world semantics. If @ is the world designated as actual and β is the world of evaluation, then the extension of ‘the actual F’ with respect to the double-index (@, β) is the extension of ‘the F’ with respect to the double-index (@, @). To evaluate the actualized description at any world of evaluation, we go back to the world designated as actual and find the extension of the non-rigid description at that world.² Thus the extension of *the actual teacher of Alexander the Great* is Aristotle for *any* world of evaluation, because we evaluate that content by looking for the extension of *the teacher of Alexander the Great* at the actual world @. The actualized description rigidly designates Aristotle.

Thus the original modal argument is not decisive against all forms of descriptivism; rigidified descriptivism purports that names are rigid yet semantically descriptive. However,

¹ See Stanley (1997) for discussion of the rigidity of names.

² A description might be rigidified in some way other than by use of ‘actual’, but since the mechanism for rigidifying a description will not matter here, I am happy to use actualized descriptivism as a convenient formulation of rigidified descriptivism.

some³ have proposed a *revised* modal argument that attacks rigidified descriptivism as well. The argument purports that while actualized descriptions are rigid designators, they are not rigid *in the same way* that names are rigid, and thus there is still a modal difference between names and actualized descriptions that suffices to establish their semantic inequivalence.⁴

The revised modal argument purports that names and rigid descriptions are rigid in different ways, but what precisely is the difference? Nathan Salmon (1981: 32-36) has helpfully offered labels: an *obstinate* (or ‘*obstinately rigid*’) designator is “insensitive to the question of whether [its designatum exists] in a given possible world; [it designates] the same thing with respect to every possible world, whether that thing exists there or not”.⁵ In contrast with obstinate designators, a *persistent* (or ‘*persistently rigid*’) designator is “an expression which designates the same thing with respect to every possible world in which that thing exists, and which designates nothing with respect to possible worlds in which that thing does not exist”.⁶ Thus when O is a contingent being⁷ the difference between obstinate and persistent designators for O is a matter of whether the expression designates O when evaluated at worlds where O does not exist. It is critical that we are *not* asking whether the word as *used* in an O-less world

³ See Branquinho (2003), Salmon (1981), Almog (1986), and Brock (2004) for an argument of this sort.

⁴ In addition to those cited in the previous footnote, Smith (1984) offers a similar revised modal argument against the view that names are equivalent to widescope descriptions. Widescopism is another descriptivist technique for suggesting that names are both descriptive and rigid; see Dummett (1981) and Sosa (2001) for endorsements of this approach.

⁵ Salmon (1981: 34).

⁶ Salmon (1981: 33-4)

⁷ If O were a *necessary* entity the distinction between obstinate and persistent designators collapses, since there would be no worlds at which O does not exist. In such a case, any expression that rigidly designated O would trivially be both obstinately and persistently rigid.

designates O; all parties in this debate will agree that such a use would not designate anything. But if a term is obstinate, then *our* use of the term, when *evaluated at* an O-less world, will designate O; if a term is persistent, then our use of the term when evaluated at an O-less world will fail to designate anything. The distinction between obstinacy and persistence thus emerges only when we inquire whether evaluating the term at a world where O does not exist will determine a [non-degenerate] extension. The obstinacy theorist will say that the extension is O, because she does not require that O exists in world *w* in order to be the extension of a term evaluated at *w*. The persistence theorist, on the other hand, will say that the evaluation fails to determine a [non-degenerate] extension, because she does require that O exists in *w* in order to be the extension of a term evaluated at *w*.

With the terminology in place, the revised modal argument against rigidified descriptivism can be stated briefly: names are obstinately rigid, but rigidified descriptions are persistently rigid. Since they have different modal profiles, names are not semantically equivalent to actualized descriptions.

Why is it alleged that names are obstinate while actualized descriptions are persistent? I will leave the putative obstinacy of names for later.⁸ Actualized descriptions are thought to be persistent because ‘the actual teacher of Alexander the Great’ is taken to lack an extension at a world in which no individual exemplifies the property being-the-teacher-of-Alexander-the-Great-at-the-actual-world. If β is a world at which Aristotle doesn’t exist, then there is no individual at β who is the actual teacher of Alexander the Great, so the actualized description has no extension

⁸ See Kaplan (1973) and (1989) (both reprinted in Davidson (2007)), Salmon (1981), Almog (1986), and Smith (1984) and (1987) in favor of the view that names are obstinate. Plumer (1989), Steinman (1985), and Stanley (1997: 567) express reservations about some of the arguments presented by these proponents.

when evaluated at⁹ such a world.¹⁰

I will argue that the descriptivist need not be concerned by the argument, because while actualized descriptions are not obstinate, neither are names, as I will argue. It is not my intention to defend actualized descriptivism here; in fact, I do not endorse the view. But I believe the modal argument, even in its revised form, does not cast doubt on rigidified descriptivism; to defend that point I must explain why the argument that names are obstinately rigid is unpersuasive. A crucial aspect of my view is that, although Kaplan¹¹ defines the term ‘direct reference’ to imply both Millianism and obstinacy, the Millian doctrine about content is

⁹ I will sometimes use the phrase ‘with respect to’ in place of ‘when evaluated at’.

¹⁰ I take it that most philosophers of language will believe that actualized descriptions are persistently rigid, not obstinately rigid. If we accept the Russellian treatment of descriptions, then to evaluate ‘the actual F’ at *w* we determine an individual *O* so long as *O* is the unique individual at *w* to be actually *F*. [Perhaps instead we determine an individual *O* so long as *O* exists at *w* and is the one and only individual who is *F*-at-the-actual-world-@; the difference between these two formulations consists in where uniqueness is required to obtain, but that question need not trouble us here; see Soames (2005: 30n22).] If there is no unique individual at *w* who is actually *F*, the description fails to denote.

Not every philosopher sees it this way. Carter (1983) argues that rigidified descriptions are in fact obstinate, and Kaplan (1989; reprinted in Davidson (2007: 790)) suggests that actualized descriptions are obstinately rigid (though not directly referential). Kaplan says “one who believes that a name is connected to its referent by a description ... can achieve rigidity, even obstinate rigidity, through the use of rigidifying operators. Thus, a Fregean ... need only add something like *actuality* to the content in order to account for the rigidity of proper names. We then have rigid designation without direct reference.” (Italics in original, underlining added for emphasis). [It is unclear whether Kaplan meant that *any* description can be used to create an obstinately rigid designator, or whether he simply meant that *some* descriptions can be used to create obstinately rigid designators. The latter claim is satisfied by the existence of a description which contingently designates an object that exists necessarily, since the resulting rigidified description would be both obstinate and persistent for the reason mentioned above in footnote 7, but the former claim would be a little surprising.]

Contrast this with the more common treatment of actualized descriptions given in Salmon (1981: 35): “if a definite description ... denotes a contingent individual *i*, then even the rigid designator $(\lambda x)A\phi(x)$, i.e., the unique individual who is, in *actuality*, such that ϕ , where ‘*A*’ is the sentential actuality operator, only persistently designates *i*.” (Italics in original, underlining added for emphasis).

While Carter (1983) and I disagree about whether rigidified descriptions are obstinate, his position is one that, like mine, gives the rigidified descriptivist an answer to the revised modal objection – on his view, there is no difference in modal profile between names and actualized descriptions, so the modal argument against descriptivism will fail. I see good reasons for thinking that both actualized descriptions and names are persistent, but Carter’s view, on which both are obstinate, will also give the rigidified descriptivist an answer to the revised modal argument.

¹¹ See Kaplan (1989; reprinted in Davidson (2007: 784-786)).

independent of the choice between obstinacy and persistence. I will explore this shortly, but before doing so we should remind ourselves of the difference between content and extension.

§1 Content and Rigidity

The Millian and the actualized descriptivist disagree about the semantic content of a name. The Millian view, unlike that of the descriptivist, holds that the content of ‘Aristotle’ is simply the referent. So where an actualized descriptivist might represent the semantic content of ‘Clinton’ as:

<being the unique bearer of (42nd President of the United States) at @, and ...>

a Millian might represent it instead as:

<Clinton>

The choice between Millianism and actualized descriptivism is thus a choice between two views of the *content* of a name.

By contrast, to say that a term is rigid (whether we say that it is obstinate, persistent, or we leave it unspecified), is to say something about the term’s *extension*, not its content.

Let us take a step back for a moment. An expression generates a content when it is uttered in a particular context. Different contexts of utterance may generate different contents: the content of Plato’s utterance of the term ‘Aristotle’ will likely differ from the content of Jackie Onassis’s utterance of ‘Aristotle’. We need not here worry about which features of the context of utterance are relevant to determining content, but it is important to note that content is generated by the pairing of an expression with a context of utterance:

Expression

➤ Content

Context-of-Utterance

Once we have established a content, we can evaluate that content to determine an extension. The extension of a name or a definite description is an individual; the extension of a sentence is a truth-value. We find the extension by evaluating the content at an evaluation world:

Content

➤ Extension

Evaluation-world

If, when evaluating a singular term, the extension changes when we change the evaluation-world, the term is non-rigid. Salmon's distinction between obstinacy and persistence is a distinction between types of *rigidity*; a distinction that concerns extension, not content. The debate between obstinacy and persistence matters when we are looking at a world of evaluation where X does not exist – it is only in that situation that the two views predict different results.¹² The results differ with respect to the *extension* of the expression. Nothing in the definitions of these two types of rigidity commits to one or the other view about *content* – the definitions of 'obstinacy' and 'persistence' make no explicit commitments to Millianism or actualized descriptivism.

This point needs to be emphasized, because it is sometimes blurred. Kaplan (1978) uses the term 'direct reference', distinguishing it from 'rigid designator'. But it is only in Kaplan (1989)

¹² I will take for granted here that some individuals are contingent beings, though some have denied this claim; see for instance Williamson (2002).

that he clarifies that, for him, to call a term ‘directly referential’ implies both that it has a Millian content¹³ and is obstinately rigid.¹⁴ In giving that explanation, my sense is that Millianism forms the core of the notion he wanted to capture, and he took it for granted that a term with Millian content would be obstinately rigid. I take Kaplan to assume that any term expressing a Millian content is obstinate, and this assumption seems to be widely accepted (though rarely discussed). I will argue to the contrary that a rigid designator with Millian content is better construed as *persistently* rigid.

§2.1 Names as Persistently Rigid

Before discussing arguments let me first motivate pretheoretically the view that a Millian should think that names are persistently rigid. Consider the way we evaluate the content of ‘the shortest spy’ at an evaluation-world – we look for the thing at the evaluation-world that satisfies that description. Now suppose that Clinton exists at our world @, but not at world β . What are we doing when we evaluate the Millian content <Clinton> (which, let us stipulate, is the content of @-utterances of ‘Clinton’) at β ? We are looking for the thing at β corresponding to this content. What thing at β is Clinton? Nothing. Clinton does not exist at β , and certainly nothing *other* than Clinton is Clinton, so our search comes up empty. No individual in β is the extension determined by <Clinton> at β , so we should simply say that there is no extension at β .

I have thus characterized the search for an extension at β in terms of looking for the right

¹³ “The ‘direct’ of ‘direct reference’ means unmediated by any propositional component... Whatever rules, procedures, or mechanisms there are that govern the search for the referent, they are irrelevant to the propositional component, to content. When *the individual* is determined ... it is *loaded into the proposition*.” (reprinted in Davidson (2007: 784)).

¹⁴ “All directly referential terms will be obstinately rigid” (reprinted in Davidson (2007: 786)). Kaplan notes that not every obstinately rigid term need be directly referential, since any rigid description denoting a necessary individual will be trivially obstinate.

sort of individual at β . Someone who thinks a term with Millian content must be obstinately rigid might object to this characterization. She might worry that I have conflated Millian contents and descriptive contents, because it may seem that I have proposed to evaluate a Millian content $\langle \text{Clinton} \rangle$ at β by looking for something that *satisfies a description* in that world. [She will likely allege that I am conflating the Millian content with the descriptive content $\langle \text{being the unique bearer of } \underline{42^{\text{nd}} \text{ President of the United States at the actual world}} \rangle$ or $\langle \text{being the unique bearer of } \underline{\text{is identical with Clinton}} \rangle$.]

Millian contents contain the *individual itself* as a constituent, while ordinary descriptive contents only specify *conditions/properties* that must be fulfilled by an individual for that individual to be the extension. [Of course, some descriptions appeal directly to individuals, such as *the daughter of Clinton* and *the thing that is identical to Clinton*, so to say that a content contains the individual as a constituent does not entail that the content is Millian rather than descriptive.] There is a difference between the Millian content $\langle \text{Clinton} \rangle$ and the descriptive content $\langle \text{being the unique bearer of } \underline{42^{\text{nd}} \text{ President of the United States at the actual world}} \rangle$, and one might think that the motivation I have presented for pairing Millianism and persistent rigidity fails to observe that difference. However, the descriptive content $\langle \text{being the unique bearer of } \underline{42^{\text{nd}} \text{ President of the United States at the actual world}} \rangle$ is evaluated by finding the unique exemplifier at the world of evaluation of that property. To evaluate a Millian content at β , on the other hand, we are simply asking *which individual at β is that guy*. Who at β is Clinton – who at β is *that guy*? Here we are not asking who exemplifies a property, but nevertheless the intuitive answer to the question is “no one”. If anyone at β were Clinton, it would surely be Clinton. But there is no such person at β , so no one at β is Clinton. I claim that evaluating $\langle \text{Clinton} \rangle$ in this way differs

from the evaluation of <being the unique bearer of 42nd President of the United States at the actual world> or even <being the unique bearer of is identical with Clinton>, though the difference is admittedly subtle. An individual exemplifies the property is identical with Clinton just in case that individual is Clinton, so the evaluations of <being the unique bearer of is identical with Clinton> and <Clinton> will be extensionally equivalent. But one should not take that *extensional* equivalence to imply that I have conflated the two *contents*; every evaluation of one content will produce the same extension that would be produced by the other content, but when we evaluate the Millian content we are not asking which individual exemplifies a property.

An ardent defender of the pairing of Millian contents and obstinacy may not be convinced – she may still think that evaluating a Millian content at world β *in no way* involves asking what thing at β is X. In the following section, I will try to identify and dispel the motivations one might have for such a view.

§2.2 Millianism Does Not Entail Obstinacy

Why is it so commonly assumed that a Millian will think that names are obstinate? One type of motivation comes from particular examples of sentences whose truth putatively requires obstinate rigidity; for instance, one might say that negative existentials are true in just the scenarios in which the name designates a certain individual at a time/world at which that individual does not exist. Another type of motivation may come from the features of Millian contents. I will address the latter consideration first.

Kaplan (1978) popularized the term ‘direct reference’, and offered some clarificatory remarks about how he understood the term in his (1989). Let us look at some of what he says about direct reference:

“I intend to use ‘*directly referential*’ for an expression whose referent, once determined, is taken as fixed for all possible circumstances, i.e., is taken as *being* the propositional component.”
(Kaplan (1978), reprinted in Davidson (2007: 727); italics in original)

The inclusion of “i.e.” in this quote suggests (though without explicitly asserting) an *equation* of Millianism with obstinacy. Saying that the referent is fixed for *all* possible circumstances suggests that the term has that referent at any point of evaluation, whether or not the referent exists there.¹⁵ To say that the referent just *is* the propositional component is just the claim that the name has a Millian content. Thus the use of “i.e.” makes it appear that Kaplan is here taking obstinacy and Millianism to be two sides of the same coin.¹⁶

Kaplan makes it clear in later work that he intends ‘direct reference’ to be defined to incorporate both Millianism and obstinate rigidity; to correctly call a term ‘directly referential’ will commit one to thinking that it expresses a Millian content and is obstinately rigid.¹⁷ And he indicates further that obstinacy is construed as a *consequence* of Millianism:

“If the individual is loaded into the proposition (to serve as the propositional component) before the proposition begins its round-the-worlds journey, it is hardly surprising that the proposition manages to find that same individual at all of its stops, even those in which the individual had no prior, native presence. The proposition conducted no search for a native who meets propositional specifications; it simply ‘discovered’ what it had carried in.”
(Kaplan (1989), reprinted in Davidson (2007: 784))

Kaplan thus appears to think that Millianism *entails* obstinacy. Why exactly is this? One

¹⁵ Kaplan clearly isn’t overlooking the question whether the referent exists at a point of evaluation in saying that the referent is fixed for all possible circumstances; this quote directly follows a distinction between obstinate and persistent rigidity, with Kaplan saying that he took Kripke to be claiming that names are obstinately rigid in virtue of several reasons for preferring obstinacy. When Kaplan says “all” possible circumstances of evaluation, he means “all”.

¹⁶ It is odd that Kaplan would say that, though, given that he elsewhere says that there are terms that are obstinately rigid without having a Millian content. Such terms are not directly referential, of course, but it still suffices to show that to be obstinately rigid is not the same thing as having a Millian content, so the “i.e.” in the quote above is misleading.

¹⁷ See footnotes 13 and 14 above for the original passages.

can imagine the following argument being reconstructed from these passages, though Kaplan himself might not endorse the reconstruction:

To evaluate a Millian content, we must first have the individual, since we cannot construct a singular proposition unless we first have that individual.¹⁸ [In this way, singular propositions differ from non-singular propositions; we do not need to have the individual prior to content-generation if the content is non-singular, since in that case the individual is not a constituent of the content.] We agree that content-generation precedes determination of an extension, since the latter is executed by taking the content we already constructed around to possible circumstances of evaluation. Thus in the case of singular propositions, we have the individual before we evaluate that content to determine an extension. Given that we have the individual already, regardless whether the individual exists at some particular circumstance of evaluation, why not think that the extension determined will be that individual, no matter what the circumstance of evaluation is like? Since we already have the individual, why say that for some points of evaluation the Millian content fails to determine any individual?

This reconstruction may not be faithful to Kaplan's intentions, but one could at least see how such an argument might be derived from things Kaplan has said. And on that picture, obstinacy does seem to simply fall out of Millianism. But the argument rests on a mistake. A content is generated at a context of utterance; to express a Millian content, we must have the individual in that context, at least given certain assumptions I am happy to take on board. But the

¹⁸ Plantinga terms the assumption that a singular proposition cannot exist at w unless the relevant individual exists at w "existentialism". If singular propositions are set-theoretic entities, existentialism is plausible, since it is natural to think that a set is built up out of its members, such that if the members did not exist the set would not exist either. See Plantinga (1979) and (1983) for his reasons for rejecting existentialism; despite Plantinga's opposition, I find the thesis plausible.

fact that we have the individual *in the context of utterance* of course does not imply that we have the individual *in every circumstance of evaluation*. It is a mistake to say the following: if we have the individual before content-generation, and we generate the content before extension-determination, then we have the individual before extension-determination, and therefore that individual is always available to be the extension. The mistake trades on an ambiguity in the ‘then’ clause; we have the individual at the context of utterance before we evaluate the singular content at a circumstance of evaluation, but that is no reason to think that the individual is eligible to serve as the extension determined at that circumstance of evaluation. It is far more natural to think that circumstance of evaluation provides the individuals eligible to serve as the extension, and thus at the Clinton-less world β , Clinton is not available to be the extension determined by a content evaluated at β .

Typically a proponent of obstinacy will offer further reasons for favoring her view – some argue that singular negative existential statements, for instance, are best understood by treating the name as obstinately rigid. But since this motivation stems from particular cases, not from Millianism *per se*, I will defer discussion of this style of argument until §3.1. In this section I want to keep the focus on the question whether the nature of Millian contents themselves push us into accepting obstinate rigidity.

In another place, Kaplan offers another statement explaining his reason for favoring obstinacy:

“I see ... a central distinction ... between what *exists* at a given point and what can be ‘carried in’ to be *evaluated* at that point, though it may exist only elsewhere. My ‘circumstances of evaluation’ evaluate contents that may have no native existence at the circumstances but can be expressed elsewhere and carried in for evaluation.”

(Kaplan (1989), reprinted in Davidson (2007: 820))

One could interpret Kaplan’s talk of ‘carrying in’ (at both Davidson (2007: 784) quoted previously as well as the passage just quoted) to mean that in evaluating a proposition containing Clinton as a constituent at β , Clinton *becomes* an eligible extension in virtue of arriving with the content. But Kaplan surely didn’t have this view in mind, and to adopt this view would do violence to the way we think about evaluations. Evaluating a singular content at β does not *add* to the domain of β in any way, as this proposal seems to suggest. The content tells us what extension we are looking for in the evaluation world, but it does not increase the stock of individuals eligible to serve as extensions.

Kaplan tells us in multiple places that his inspiration for direct reference comes from logic:

“It is a striking and important feature of the possible world semantics for quantified intensional logics, which Kripke did so much to create and popularize, that variables, those paradigms of rigid designation, designate the same individual in *all* possible worlds whether the individual ‘exists’ or not.”

(Kaplan (1978), reprinted in Davidson (2007: 727))

“This conception of direct reference takes the variable under an assignment of value as its paradigm. In evaluating “Fx” at a world *w*, we do not ask whether its value exists in *w*, we only ask what value was *assigned* to the variable before the process of evaluation at *w* began. Until a value is assigned we have nothing to evaluate.

(Kaplan (1989), reprinted in Davidson (2007: 786))

It is significant that in the latter passage, Kaplan in the next few paragraphs takes pains to explain that direct reference is a theory featuring Millian contents. While Kaplan formulates “direct reference”¹⁹ in such a way that it implies obstinate rigidity, it is Millianism that seems to

¹⁹ If we instead took ‘direct reference’ to be no more than another way of saying that a term expresses a Millian content, on the other hand, a directly referential term might be persistently rigid. I have elected to use ‘direct reference’ in Kaplan’s sense, and simply speak of Millianism as a theory of content that has no commitment to either version of rigidity.

form the core of the notion of direct reference – the appeal to variables in logic is meant to emphasize that the process of assigning an individual to a variable is not something that could be represented with a descriptive *content*. One might say that the way in which a variable is associated with an individual is a matter of presemantics, not semantics. But as I have argued, we do not get obstinate rigidity simply from Millianism – the point of §2.1 above was that we can hold that a term has Millian content, and still explain evaluation of that content in a way such that it is natural to think that the term is persistently rigid rather than obstinate.

Smith (1987) appeals to the analogy with logic in a slightly different way that may help the obstinacy theorist:

With names, designata are specified in the base-clauses of our semantic theory antecedently to the running of the possible-worlds machinery. It is for this reason that names can be uniformly assigned designata with respect to worlds independently of the issue of whether those designata exist in those worlds – since this latter issue will be relevant only to the working out of satisfaction at worlds that is irrelevant to names.

(Smith (1987: 87-88); underlining added for emphasis).

Smith's point, unlike Kaplan's, emphasizes the suggestion that the extension of a name is determined prior to the possible worlds machinery. I do not know whether Kaplan himself would endorse Smith's formulation of the point,²⁰ but it seems to me more compelling to hold tightly to the relationship between content and extension articulated by Kaplan and apply it to names as well

²⁰

For some textual reason to think he would endorse Smith's argument:

“When the individual is determined (when the reference is fixed, in the language of Saul Kripke), it is loaded into the proposition. It is this that makes the referent prior to the propositional component, and it is this that reverses the arrow from propositional component to individual.” (Kaplan (1989), reprinted in Davidson (2007: 784); underlining added for emphasis).

But Kaplan might be saying merely that in generating a Millian content an object is antecedently individuated (thus differentiating Millian contents from purely descriptive contents) while still allowing that we evaluate a Millian content at a world of evaluation to determine an extension.

– allow that the name is assigned an extension at the context of utterance in such a way that semantically the only feature of the name embedded in content is the individual itself, but still allow that contents are evaluated at a circumstance, and that the extension is determined through that evaluation. Understood this way, we can maintain Millianism while also holding that extensions are determined by evaluating contents at circumstances.

§2.3 Obstinacy and Domains

There are other ways of motivating obstinacy that do not depend on Millianism per se, but would still imply that terms with Millian contents are obstinately rigid. We might, for instance, suggest that every world has the same domain of individuals, thus ensuring that Clinton is in the domain of every world (and hence eligible to serve as an extension at every world). One way to develop this idea is to say that every individual is a necessary being. But the revised modal argument has no chance of success if every individual is a necessary being, because the distinction between obstinate and persistent designators only arises for contingent beings. If there are no worlds at which Clinton does not exist, then the name ‘Clinton’ and the actualized description ‘the actual 42nd president of the US’ are rigid in exactly the same way: both terms are strongly rigid, i.e., trivially both obstinate and persistent.

There is another strategy for defending obstinacy that does not turn on Millianism per se. One might propose to divorce existence-at-W from being-in-the-domain-of-W. On this alternative, we say that Clinton is eligible to serve as an extension at every world, but does not exist at every world; being in the domain of W suffices to make him eligible to be an extension at W, but it does not imply that he exists in W.

We certainly could interpret the formal structure of possible worlds semantics in this way

– it is not mandatory that we treat the domain of a world as specifying the individuals that exist in that world. But it is very appealing to think of domains along those lines. First, to do so allows us a way of understanding what it means to be in a world’s domain that avoids any hint of an unsettling distinction between existing-in-a-world and being-in-a-world. Second, if we were to divorce membership-in-W’s-domain from existence-in-W, we would violate a plausible doctrine Plantinga has termed “serious actualism”. Serious actualism asserts that for O to exemplify F at W, O must exist at W. The intuitive appeal of serious actualism seems reasonably clear: exemplification (at w) requires an exemplifier (at w). The principle is controversial, however, and indeed proponents of obstinacy tend²¹ to deny serious actualism – certain types of negative existentials are commonly cited as both motivating obstinacy and posing a decisive challenge to serious actualism. For the latter point, it is suggested that nonexistence is a property that O can exemplify at W without itself existing at W. For the former point, the truth of ‘Clinton does not exist’ with respect to β is thought to require that the name picks out Clinton at β so that we can say of whom we are predicating nonexistence. This example will be discussed further in §3.1. For now, I will note simply that while I know of no non-question-begging argument in favor of serious actualism, the doctrine is intuitively appealing, and thus the fact that obstinacy theorists deny it poses an intuitive (though admittedly not decisive) cost to their view. Those who favor obstinacy may argue that negative existentials show that the appeal of serious actualism is illusory, but to assess that claim we will have to look at the negative existential argument in detail, a task to which I now turn.

§3 The Arguments for Obstinacy

²¹ At least, I do not know of any obstinacy theorist who endorses serious actualism.

I argued in the previous section that Millianism does not *entail* obstinate designation, but we have not yet considered arguments suggesting that this pairing should merely be *preferred* over the pairing of Millianism and persistent designation. There are two arguments suggesting that proper names are better construed as obstinate than as persistent, both of which should be answered to bolster the case for combining Millianism and persistence.

§3.1 The Negative Existential Argument for Obstinacy

The first argument for obstinacy is motivated by consideration of one type of negative existential. Consider the proposition expressed by @-denizens in uttering

- (1) Clinton does not exist.

The proposition is false when evaluated at @, but it is true when evaluated at β . Since Clinton exists at @, the propositions we express in uttering sentences about Clinton are plausibly singular – supposing names have Millian contents, the propositions we express by sentences about Clinton contain the individual as a constituent. Nathan Salmon suggests²² that nonexistence can be predicated of an individual without presupposing that the individual exists, and along these lines one might think that (1) expresses the singular proposition attributing nonexistence to Clinton:

- (2) <Clinton, nonexistence>

The argument for obstinacy now runs as follows: if (2) is true when evaluated at β , then the extension of <Clinton> at β exemplifies nonexistence at β . If ‘Clinton’ is persistently rigid, <Clinton> is extensionless at β , so we have not determined an individual to exemplify properties, including the property nonexistence. Thus the truth of (2) at β shows that <Clinton> must determine an extension at β ; <Clinton> designates Clinton (even at β), and that individual

²² See Salmon (1987: 56).

exemplifies nonexistence at β .²³

I find this argument for obstinacy underwhelming, for three reasons. First, this explanation of (1) requires some awkward claims. It is discomforting to say that (1) is true at β in virtue of some individual exemplifying the property nonexistence. Granting that there is such a property, intuition suggests that nothing exemplifies it. It is intuitively tempting to run the following argument: If Clinton exemplifies nonexistence, then *there is* something that exemplifies it, hence *there exists* an exemplifier. But if the exemplifier *exists*, how can that exemplifier simultaneously fail to exist? That sounds contradictory, but it seems to follow from the suggestion that something may exemplify nonexistence.

This is certainly not a decisive argument against obstinacy; obstinacy theorists will naturally deny the initial intuition that nonexistence is unexemplified. My point here is simply that there is some theoretical cost to denying the commonsense intuition. Thus I do not claim that this first point is a *refutation* of the argument for obstinacy. In responding to Plantinga (1983), who presses this same sort of serious actualist objection against the treatment of negative existentials that obstinacy theorists favor, John Pollock²⁴ states that the objection begs the question against the obstinacy theorist. Pollock is right; anyone who favors the negative existential argument for obstinacy will simply also deny serious actualism. To reiterate, my point here is just that the account favoring obstinacy has some sharp intuitive costs – obstinacy theorists are pressured to deny serious actualism, but serious actualism is intuitively plausible. So if the obstinacy theorist's account of (1) is genuinely the best one, it will be so only because there are benefits that outweigh

²³ An argument like this can be found in Salmon (1981: 37-8) and (1998: 287).

²⁴ See Pollock (1985), and Plantinga (1985) for a response.

this intuitive cost.

A second reason to resist the negative existential argument for obstinacy is that the proposed account of (1) fails to apply to all cases of negative existentials. There are two types of negative existentials: those where the name refers at the world of utterance, and those where it does not. (1) is an example of the former case: ‘Clinton’ designates someone at the world of utterance @. For an example of the other case, consider:

(3) Frosty the Snowman does not exist.

‘Frosty’ does not designate any individual at @.²⁵ Thus an @-denizen’s utterance of (3) does not express the analogue of (2), which we might have tried to represent as:

(4) <Frosty, nonexistence>

Whether or not there are possible worlds at which a proposition of this form can be generated, @ is not one of them, since there is no such individual at @. Nevertheless, an @-denizen successfully expresses a proposition in uttering (3) that is true when evaluated at @. What is that proposition? Answering that question will take us too far afield, but we can at least conclude that the proposed account of (1) won’t work. There are two kinds of negative existentials, each of which demands an explanation, and the obstinacy-friendly account does not explain both cases. Ceteris paribus, we would prefer a unified explanation of both cases; perhaps when we develop an account of the Frosty-type negative existentials, that account will also apply to the Clinton-type cases. If so, such an explanation would be preferable on grounds of unification.

Finally, to build on the previous point, there is good reason to think that an account of

²⁵ There are of course views on which ‘Frosty’ names an actual abstract object; I am ignoring those views for present purposes. They will face their own problems in explaining why (3) seems to be true when uttered at @, but this is not the place to evaluate every theory of fictional names.

Frosty-type negative existentials *will* help with the Clinton-type cases as well. The difference between (1) and (3) is that in the former case, we have Clinton as an available constituent of the proposition expressed. In the latter case, we do not have Frosty as an available constituent, so we have more resources to draw on in accounting for the content of (1) than we have for the content of (3). It is hard to imagine how having additional resources could inhibit an explanation of a negative existential case, so we should be reluctant to pay any costs to explain Clinton-type negative existentials unless we get an explanation of the Frosty-type negative existentials as well.

These three points lead me to doubt that the obstinacy-friendly account of (1) is really the best explanation. That explanation has counterintuitive implications, we still need an account of (3), and we have reason to think that an account of (3) will provide the unified explanation of both types of negative existentials. I think this sufficiently undermines this particular argument for obstinacy. But if a unified explanation does not strike one as a compelling goal, it is worth noting that the persistence theorist can match the obstinacy theorist in offering a plausible account of (1) that doesn't apply to (3):²⁶

(5) <Negation, <Clinton, existence> >

(5) is true when evaluated at β just in case the constituent singular proposition

(6) <Clinton, existence>

is false when evaluated at β . The persistence theorist can easily explain why (6) is false at β :

(6) is true at β so long as the extension determined at β by <Clinton> exemplifies the property existence at β . Since <Clinton> *fails* to determine an extension at β according to the persistence

²⁶ This observation has been around in the literature for some time; see as an example Plantinga (1974: ch apter 8) or Stanley (1997).

theorist, it is easy to see why (6) should fail to be true at β . Thus (5) *is* true at β , and we can say this without requiring that the Millian content <Clinton> determined as its extension at β some non-existing individual.

I do not think we should be content with an explanation of (1) that does not also apply to (3), but setting that concern aside, (5) is more palatable than (2) because it does not require the denial of serious actualism – we need not claim (as the obstinacy theorist must) that some properties are exemplified at a world without the presence of an exemplifier at that world.

§3.2 Modality and Time

There is a second argument for obstinacy that may be more threatening. In broad strokes the argument is that we have good reason to think that proper names are temporally obstinate, and since modality and time are analogous, we should think that names are modally obstinate as well.²⁷ The complicating details arise in identifying the reasons for thinking that names are temporally obstinate. João Branquinho (2003) offers two examples:

- (7) Kripke was not born yet in 1940.
- (8) Kripke will still be influential in 2050.

As a preliminary observation, one might think that if the analogy between temporal and modal cases is relevant here, we could bypass (7) and (8) and give cases supporting modal obstinacy directly. If it is not obvious what the modal analogues of (7) and (8) are, perhaps we should be suspicious that the analogy between temporal and modal cases is all that strong. Before we try to identify modal examples, however, it will be worthwhile to explain more carefully why (7) and (8)

²⁷ An argument like this appears in Kaplan (1973) [reprinted in Davidson (2007: 247-9)] and Salmon (1981: 36-40).

seem to motivate temporal obstinacy; there are three features worth mentioning.

First, we should note that (7) prominently features a negation. At the end of §3.1 I noted that the persistence theorist could explain away problems with ‘Clinton does not exist’ by interpreting the content as *it is not the case that Clinton exemplifies existence*, i.e.,

(5) <Negation, <Clinton, existence> >

A similar move might be made with (7), interpreting the negation as wide-scope in an effort to dispel the threat. But (8) does not feature any negation, so such a move will not work here. For this reason, (8) poses a greater threat to persistence than (7), so a defense of [temporal] persistence should say something in particular about how to account for (8).

The second point is a reminder that any evidence for obstinacy vis-à-vis persistence must focus on the extension of a rigid term at a point of evaluation where the relevant individual fails to exist. Branquinho suggests that (7) and (8) support temporal obstinacy because 2006-denizens speak truly in uttering these sentences. But this would provide no support for obstinacy if we are evaluating (8) for truth at 2006; if we are evaluating at 2006 it does not matter whether ‘Kripke’ is obstinate or persistent, since Kripke exists at 2006. We are of course interested in 2006-*utterances*, but if we are presenting evidence for obstinacy we cannot be *evaluating* the propositions thus generated at 2006 – Kripke exists at 2006, so obstinacy and persistence theorists will *agree* about the extension of the name evaluated at that time. Kripke did not exist in 1940, and by hypothesis will not exist in 2050, so those are the times at which we want to evaluate the contents of (7) and (8), respectively.

Once we have specified that much, it is clear that the temporal indices in (7) and (8) must be applied *twice over*. For (7) to motivate obstinacy, *In 1940* must contribute to the *content* of

the 2006 utterance, and in addition it must specify the time at which we *evaluate* the expressed proposition.

Having specified that we are interested in evaluating (7) at 1940 and evaluating (8) at 2050, what is it about the propositions expressed by (7) and (8) that should catch our attention – the temporal index specified in the sentence, or the tensed locutions ‘was not yet’ and ‘will still be’?

The temporal indices ‘in 1940’ and ‘in 2050’ have an obvious modal analogue, namely ‘at world δ ’. Finding a modal analogue to the tensed locutions ‘was not yet’ and ‘will still be’ is more challenging, however.²⁸ This is particularly important for the future tense construction in (8). Kripke’s present actions have causal ramifications for the future, including events that will occur after Kripke’s death. Current utterances of (8) and (10) express propositions that are true at 2050 precisely because events at 2050 are causally affected by present events. But this causal connection between times does not have any analogue in modality: events at β are not causally affected by events at $@$.²⁹ So a proponent of modal persistence should not feel directly threatened by (8) – even if (8) motivates temporal obstinacy, there is no reason to expect an analogous motivation for modal obstinacy.

Causal influence is irrelevant to the fact that a current utterance of (7) expresses a

²⁸ Andre Gallois has pointed out to me that if the tense locutions are treated as restricted quantifiers, then we should recognize a modal analogue – surely there can be restricted quantifiers over worlds. But the fact remains that the most compelling arguments for temporal obstinacy rely on examples in which the causal influence of events across times is critical, and we will not find anything analogous situation motivating modal obstinacy given that distinct worlds are causally independent of one another.

²⁹ Tom McKay has reminded me that if we endorse transworld identity, the claim that there are no causal relations across worlds is no longer so straightforward. But since the issue here concerns an individual who does not exist at world β , we will not have to worry about any relevant event existing in both worlds, even if we are sympathetic to transworld identity.

proposition true at 1940; assuming there is no backward-causation, Kripke's actions have no causal effect on events at 1940. So a modal persistence theorist cannot dismiss (7) on the same grounds that she dismisses (8). But as noted above, the persistence theorist has the makings for a response to (7) by exploiting the negation. The persistence theorist will say that singular propositions attributing properties to Kripke will be false when evaluated at times/worlds where Kripke fails to exist, so the negations of such propositions will be true at those points of evaluation. Thus the persistence theorist can account for the intuition that a current utterance of (7) expresses a proposition that is true when evaluated at 1940.

The conclusion I want to draw at this point is not that modal persistence has been vindicated. All I want to say now is that the *tense* element of (7) and (8) does not seem to threaten modal obstinacy, because the analogy between time and modality breaks down for (8) [in virtue of the fact that events at one time may causally influence events at another time, but events at one world do not causally influence events at another world], and the negation can be interpreted as taking wide-scope in (7). Thus the argument for obstinacy based on modality and time is not compelling. However, I *do* think that modal indices like 'at world δ ' pose a threat to persistence, and while I think that threat can be addressed, we need to carefully explain the problem.

§3.3 World-Indexing Operators

Consider the propositions expressed by @-utterances of:

(11) Clinton is happy.

and

(12) At @, Clinton is happy.

What takes place when we evaluate these propositions at world β ? When an @-denizen utters (11), the content is simply

(13) <Clinton, happiness>

Is this proposition true when evaluated at β ? No. And the persistence theorist has no difficulty accounting for that result. <Clinton> fails to determine an extension at β , so (13) is false at β degenerately – the truth of (13) would require that the extension determined by <Clinton> at β exemplified the property at β . So (11) poses no threat to persistence.

(12), however, *is* troubling for the persistence theory. The orthodox treatment of ‘at @’ suggests that if (11) expresses a proposition true at @, then (12) expresses a truth at *every* world of evaluation. After all, there is only one world @, so if p is true at @, it is necessarily the case that *at @, p*. This poses a threat to persistence: (12) seems to express a non-negative proposition containing Clinton as a constituent, and that proposition seems to be true at β . Given the wide-scope maneuver, the persistence theorist has no problem with *negative* singular propositions being true at worlds lacking the constituent, but here she faces a problem. Obstnacy, of course, solves the problem by allowing that when the content <Clinton> is evaluated at β it determines the extension Clinton, and that individual is happy at @. Persistence theorists can’t adopt that easy explanation, so (12) finally poses us with an example that seems to motivate obstnacy over persistence.

The problem still needs to be clarified, however. Whether (12) ultimately threatens persistence depends on the proposition @-denizens express in uttering (12), and we have not specified yet what proposition that is. Consider the rendering most likely to pose a problem for persistence:

(14) <<Clinton, happiness>, truth-at-@>

If we want to say that this proposition is true when evaluated at β , we have to say that (13) exemplifies truth-at-@ at β . The persistence theorist will not want to abandon serious actualism [the thesis that an exemplification at w entails the existence of an exemplifier at w], since she wants to criticize the obstinacy account of negative existentials for denying that thesis, so she will be forced to say that the singular proposition (13) exists at β . But she does not want to say that (13) exists at β , since it contains a constituent who does not exist at β . Thus the persistence theorist should be reluctant to say that (14) is true when evaluated at β . If (14) is false when evaluated at β , (14) is not a necessary truth, contrary to the orthodoxy about the content of (12). So if (14) is the content of an @-utterance of (12), the persistence theorist will have to make some sort of concession.

Her best response here is to say that (14) is *weakly* necessary; that is, (14) is true at all worlds at which the proposition exists.³⁰ (14) does not exist at β , of course, since one of its constituents does not exist at β . So the persistence theorist concedes that (14) is not a necessary truth in the sense of *strong* necessity (true at every world), though it is weakly necessary (true at every world at which the proposition exists). How counterintuitive is this? The operator ‘at @’ is a technical notion, not part of ordinary language, so we have some flexibility in interpreting the operator as philosophical needs dictate. The persistence theorist’s suggestion that (14) fails to be true at β is founded on plausible claims: the constituent proposition (13) does not exist at β [assuming the ontological dependence thesis that singular propositions cannot exist at a world

³⁰ There is precedent for those who favor serious actualism to appeal to weak necessity; see Caplan (2007) and Plantinga (1979) [although Plantinga’s appeal to weak necessity arises only in discussing a view he rejects, one which combines serious actualism with existentialism].

unless their constituents exist at that world],³¹ and as such (13) cannot exemplify properties at β given serious actualism. The philosophical motivation for thinking that (14) is true at β turns on the thought that there is only one world @, and hence regardless of the world of evaluation (14) is true. If we want to preserve serious actualism and the ontological dependence thesis, we have to accept that embedding a singular proposition³² under an operator like ‘At β ’ produces a proposition that is weakly necessary, but not strongly necessary. That is a price we should be willing to pay.

§4 Conclusion

We have argued against the view that names are obstinately rigid on the grounds that (a) Millianism does not require obstinate rigidity, (b) a natural way to think about evaluating Millian contents is well-suited to persistent rigidity, and (c) obstinate rigidity has some counterintuitive implications that are not offset by any substantial advantage with respect to difficult case. Once we recognize that there are no good reasons for treating names as obstinately rigid, the modal argument against rigidified descriptivism (even in its revised formulation) falters.

³¹ As noted above in footnote 18, Plantinga names this ontological dependence thesis “existentialism”.

³² If a proposition exists non-contingently, the gap between weak necessity and strong necessity is closed – there is only a difference if the proposition fails to exist at all worlds. I am supposing that the only contingent propositions are singular propositions. [Andre Gallois observed that I am also assuming that ‘necessity’ is defined as ‘true at all worlds’; if we instead defined ‘necessity’ as ‘not false at any world’, then there would be no difference between weak and strong necessity, even for propositions that existed contingently. Plantinga (1983, 1979) discusses the option of defining necessity in this way.]

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