

Names, and What they are Names of

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The view articulated in this paper by Ruth Millikan that certain terms of natural language refer to "substances" in a non-descriptive way has a good deal to recommend it, but I do wish to pose one question a bit later. First, I wish to comment on some grammatical issues that expand on some points in the paper, and then turn to the sticky issue of dinosaurs.

The Aristotelian arrangement of 'substances' as discussed here likens terms referring to individuals (proper names) to "substances" in the other sense used here, namely, as designated by mass terms--'gold', 'water', etc. The 'secondary substances', kinds of individuals like lions and houses, then are classified differently. However, from a grammatical and semantic point of view, it has been noted widely that mass terms like 'gold' and 'water' share a great deal in common with count "kind" terms like 'lions' and 'pencils', which grammatically appear in the plural (in English); and that proper names of individuals grammatically and semantically differ from these. Thus, mass terms appear to designate entities that act much more like secondary substances than primary, from a grammatical point of view. What is of more interest from this point of view is that both mass terms like 'water' and kind terms like 'lions' have distributional and semantic properties in common with proper names, and not at all like noun phrases occurring with determiner like 'this', 'all', 'many', etc. So, for instance, the phrase 'so-called' may, in addition to proper names as in (1), be applied to kind and mass terms, as in (2).

1. Slim is so-called because of his build.
2. a. Cardinals are so-called because of their color.
b. Coke is so-called because it once contained cocaine.

Based on observations of this type, along with several others, the theory of reference to kinds presented in Carlson (1980) argues that mass terms and kind terms should also be regarded as names, though of sorts of things that may be regarded as individuals, differing from ordinary individuals like you or the Eiffel Tower in certain ways but ontologically of the same sort, as Millikan outlines here. Thus, from a grammatical point of view, the facts fall out in a friendly way for Millikan. This allows for these terms to make direct, non-descriptive reference to the substances out there much in the same way Kripke suggests for individuals and Putnam for kinds.

However, the underpinnings of this point of view require that the objects designated by such terms have objective significance, which may include besides real essences such matters as utilitarian function, social function, and other matters as discussed in section 2. From what is presented here, it is a little difficult to determine just what sorts of terms are excluded from having the status of substances. The few concrete examples are complex ('red square'; 'two-inch malleable object') as opposed to the numerous simple substance-referring examples. By description, non-basic-level terms also do not designate substances. So, while 'chair' would designate one, 'furniture' would not; or, 'dog' would designate one, but 'dachshund' would not. Yet, the paper provides us with no reason to think this might be so. But what concerns me most--and this concern is by no means confined to just this paper--is how, in a realist theory of the sort discussed here, we get "neutral" representations of the sort we must countenance. To illustrate, consider (my knowledge of) dinosaurs. First, I would surmise that the term 'dinosaur', as opposed to 'tyrannosaurus rex' or 'pterodactyl', is the basic-level term, being far more frequent, earlier learned, monomorphemic, etc. Now, as a child, I was like many fascinated by dinosaurs, reading about them in books, going to museums, etc. I vaguely recall learning that they were very large and fearsome reptiles that lived way, way in the past sometime, and are now extinct. I also vaguely recall learning that, since dinosaurs are extinct, such present animals like iguanas, crocodiles, Komodo dragons, etc are not dinosaurs. The logic of this seemed inescapable. More recently, I heard something about some theory of dinosaurs saying they were warm-blooded and

much more mammalian creatures than previously thought. And, since a crocodile or a Komodo dragon isn't like this, it's not a dinosaur, and the logic of this, too, is quite clear. But we now have two competing ideas about dinosaurs, one where they're a nominal kind ('reptile, typically big, that lived a long time ago'), and the other where they're a natural kind.

So, when we say of dinosaurs that they once roamed the earth, what is the reference of 'they' in this sentence?? We cannot be assured it is fixed by a real kind, even if you're a scientist who fervently believes this to be true; we cannot be assured it is fixed by usage alone since the scientist might just be right. Note that in either case, the amount of knowledge that carries over from one instance to the next--dinosaurs being extinct and hence a closed finite class of individuals--is the same, so this criterion is of no help, either. This is why I wish Millikan had developed the last tantalizing bit at the end of the paper when she asks, "But have we not overlooked an obvious distinction here between merely knowing a word and knowing what a word means?" Achieving a separation between the two--if indeed different--might not only give us a better idea of what concepts are, but also might teach us something about what they are concepts of.

Carlson, G. (1980). *Reference to Kinds in English*. New York: Garland.