J.S. Mill on the Notion of Proper Name

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Abstract

There are some important debates regarding the notion of proper name. There are having different views about the notion of proper name. Proper Name appears to be heart of several debates in philosophy. Why should western thinkers care about proper names? We get proper name through two different ways: Firstly, between the world of our thoughts, beliefs and desires and the world of our actions, and secondly, between the linguistic and the non-linguistic, between the world of meanings and truth-values. Thus, proper names turn out to be important for several reasons. And the one reason is what the meaning of proper name? J.S. Mill offers that seems to be the most intuitive answer to the question of meaning of proper name. He says that names are denotative, but not connotative. In this paper I will be primarily concerned the nature of proper name in Mill philosophy.

Key Words: Proper name, Non-connotative term, Singular term, Concrete term, General name.

The term 'Proper Name' came from the Greek word ὄνομα κύριον and also Latin by *nomen proprium,* meant a 'genuine' name, or a name more genuinely such than other names. Accordingly the ὄνομα κύριον was contrasted with the προσηγορία or 'appellation', a term used to describe what we call 'general names' or 'common nouns' like *man, horse, tree.* The Stoic Chrysippus made a sharper distinction, confining ὄνομα to what we now call proper names.

The later philosophers, by using the epithet κύριον either with or without ὄνομα , imply that the προσηγορία is a sort of ὄνομα , but not a quite genuine one. No better account exists than that by Dionysius Thrax, a pupil of Aristarchus. He say that Ά noun or name' (the one word *δνομα* is used, this covering both notions ; the French *nom = nom substantif,* whereas the Germans, like ourselves, distinguish *Nomen* = 'noun' and *Namen*) 'is a declinable part of speech signifying a body or an activity, a body like "pen" and an activity like "education", and may be used both commonly and individually; commonly (*κοινώς*) like "indian", "lion" and individually *(ίδίως* "privately") like "Hume".' Dionysius himself also uses the term *κύριον,* identifying it with such names or nouns as are used 'individually' (tSi'ojy); of the

κὕριον he says it is 'that which signifies individual being' *(την Ιόίαν ούσίαν)* such as "Kant", "Vivekananda".

J.S. Mill holds that proper names have only denotations and they are non-connotative terms. That means, a proper name, for Mill, has only reference but has no sense. Mill holds that a proper name is a singular name, non-connotative and concrete term. A proper name is, for J.S. Mill, a kind of singular name which is a non-connotative and concrete term. To explain Mill's view about proper name, I try to explain his views about name, singular term, non-connotative term etc.

Generally a name is a word or a group of word. For example, the expressions 'Aristotle', 'The pupil of Plato' are instances of name. But any word or any group of word is not a name. For Thomas Hobbes, "A name is 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."[1]

According to Mill, a name is a word or a group of words which expresses things of which anything can be affirmed or denied. For example, the word 'Aristotle' is a name, because, the word refer to a person of which anything can be affirmed or denied. When we say 'Aristotle is a man', in this sentence, the term 'Aristotle' is used to refer Aristotle and we also affirm a quality, i.e., the property of being man, of that person. But the word 'all', 'if-then', 'either-or' etc. cannot be considered as names. Mill says,

> *It is usual, before examining the various classes into which names are commonly divided, to begin by distinguishing from names of every description, those words which are not names, but only parts of names. Among such are reckoned particles, as of, to, truly, often; the inflected cases of nouns substantive, as me, him, John's; and even adjectives, as large, heavy. These words do not express things of which anything can be affirmed or denied. We cannot say, Heavy fell, or A heavy fell; Truly, or A truly, was asserted; Of, or An of, was in the room. Unless, indeed, we are speaking of the mere words themselves, as when we say, Truly is an English word, or, Heavy is an adjective.*[2]

Mill holds that such type of words or a group of words do not express things of which anything can be affirmed or denied. According to Mill, a word or a group of words can be considered as name only if that word or group of words is used as subject term of a sentence. He also say that all names are names of something, real or imaginary; but many things haven't been given individual names. Others have—e.g. persons and remarkable places. And when we want to pick out something that doesn't have its own individual name, we construct one out of two or more words, each of which could be used by itself to name

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[1] Computation or Logic, Thomas Hobbes, vol-1,ed. William Molesworth,p-16

[2] J.S. Mill, '*A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*', in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.25

an indefinite number of other objects. For example I say 'this bag' to designate x, one particular bag; 'this' and 'bag' are each names that can be applied to many things other than x, though in combination in this particular context they pick out x. That is one use of names that apply to more than one thing; if it were their only use, they would be mere contrivances for economizing the use of language.

But it is not their only function. They also enable us to assert general propositions, affirming or denying a predicate of an indefinite number of things at once. So the distinction between general names and individual or singular names is fundamental, and can be considered as the most basic classificatory split in names. Here's how it is standardly understood: 'general name' = 'name that can be truly affirmed, in the same sense, of each of indefinitely many things'. 'individual or singular name' = 'name that can be truly affirmed, in the same sense, of only one thing'.

For Mill, there are two types of name: general name and singular name. According to Mill, singular name is only capable of being truly affirm of one single person, at least in the same sense. Mill says,

> *An individual or singular name is a name which is only capable of being truly affirmed, in the same sense, of one thing.*[3]

The expressions 'Aristotle', 'The pupil of Plato' are, according to Mill, singular names. According to Mill the expression 'Aristotle' is a singular name, because Aristotle is only capable of being truly affirmed of one single person. Though there are many persons who bear the same name. The expression 'The pupil of Plato' is also a singular name. Since, there cannot be more than one person of whom it can be truly affirmed, is implied in the meaning of the words.

On the other hand, according to Mill, a general name is capable of being truly affirmed of an indefinite number of things in the same sense. For example the word man is only capable of being truly affirmed of Ram, James, Rahul and some other persons and also we assert that they all possess those qualities. Mill says,

> *A general name is familiarly defined, a name which is capable of being truly affirmed, in the same sense, of each an indefinite number of things.*[4]

In this connection Mill distinguish between general name and collective name. According to Mill, A general name is a one type of name and those names can be predicated of each individual of a multitude. For example, The 50th regiment of foot in the Indian army. It is a collective name. The name is not a general name. For Mill, the name is an individual name. Since, it can be predicated of a multitude of individual soldiers taken jointly. But it cannot be predicated of them severally. According to Mill we may say that Ram is a soldier, and Sham is a soldier, but we cannot say, Ram is the 50th regiment and

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[3] J.S. Mill, '*A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive'*, in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.28
[4] J.S. Mill, '*A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive'*, in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.28

Sham is the 50ᵗʰ regiment. Thus "The 50ᵗʰ regiment" is a collective name, but not a general name.

For Mill, the word 'men' is a general name, because the word 'men' is capable of being truly affirmed of indefinite number of individuals in the same sense. According to Mill, general names also refer to certain qualities. When a general name is used as a predicate in a sentence, it asc ribes some property to something designated by the subject term of that sentence. Thus, general names are connotative terms. Accordingly, Mill holds that general names cannot be considered as proper names. But there are some singular terms which are also connotative. For example, 'the author of Gitanjali' is a singular term which is used to refer to a singular individual but it refer to that very individual if that individual possesses the property of being the writer of Gitanjali. So the expression 'the author of Gitanjali' being connotative term cannot be regarded as proper name, according to Mill. He says,

> *A connotative term is one which denotes a subject, and implies an attribute. By a subject is here meant anything which possesses attributes. Thus John, or London, or England, are name which signify a subject only. Whiteness, length, virtue, signify an attribute only. None of these names, therefore, are connotative. But white, long, virtuous, are connotative.*[5]

Mill holds that proper names are non-connotative. He says that a non-connotative term is one type term which signifies a subject only or an attribute only. According to him proper name denotes the individuals. But the individuals do not indicate any attributes as belonging to those individuals. Generally when we name a boy by the name Rahul, or a cat by the name dec, these names are simply used to those individuals to be made subjects. Indeed, that we must have some reason for giving them those names. A man have been named Rahul, since that was the name of his father. But it is no significance of the word Rahul, that the father of the person so called bore the same name.

According to Mill, a proper name is also a concrete term. For, a proper name is used to refer to particular concrete individuals. Mill says,

> *A concrete name is a name which stands for a thing; an abstract name is a name which stands for an attribute of a thing. Thus John, the sea, this table, are names of things. White, also, is a name of a thing, or rather of things.*[6]

A concrete name is one that stands for a thing; an abstract name stands for an attribute of a thing. Thus 'Kant', 'the river', 'this pen', are names of things. 'Green' is also a name of things, and 'Greenness' is the name of a quality or attribute they all have. 'Man' is a name of many things; 'humanity' is a name of an attribute of those things. 'Old' is a name of

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[5] J.S. Mill, '*A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*', in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.31
[6] J.S. Mill, '*A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*', in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.29

things; 'old age' is a name of one of their attributes. According to Mill proper name are not abstract name, because an abstract name stands for an attribute of a thing. Mill says,

> *"By abstract, then I shall always, in Logic proper, mean the opposite of concrete; by an abstract name, the name of an attribute; by a concrete name, the name of an object"[7]*

Therefore according to Mill, proper names are non-connotative, singular and concrete term.

But there are four objections to Mill theory that have often motivated philosophers to reject it. These objections appear in the work of Gottlob Frege and those are known as Frege's Puzzles.

The first is the Objection from Cognitive Significance. The names 'Netaji' and 'Subhash Chandra Bose' refer to the same person. Therefore, if Millianism is correct, they have the same meaning. The sentences Netaji is Netaji and Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose differ only in that Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose contains the name 'Subhash Chandra Bose' in a position where Netaji is Netaji contains 'Netaji'. Therefore, if Millianism is true, sentences Netaji is Netaji and Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose mean the same thing, and express the same proposition. However, Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose is informative whereas Netaji is Netaji is not: as Frege put it, Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose can contain a valuable extension of our knowledge, but Netaji is Netaji cannot. Furthermore, a rational, competent speaker could understand both and yet think that Netaji is Netaji is true and Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose is false. Finally, Netaji is Netaji is analytic and a priori, whereas Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose is synthetic and a posteriori. These sentences differ in cognitive significance. But if they expressed the same proposition, they would not differ in cognitive significance. Therefore, Millianism is incorrect.

The second major argument against Millianism is the Objection from Belief Ascriptions. Ram believes that Netaji is Netaji. Ram believes that Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose. These belief ascriptions are exactly alike, except that Ram believes that Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose contains the name 'Subhash Chandra Bose' in a position where Ram believes that Netaji is Netaji contains 'Netaji'. Therefore, if Millianism is correct, then Ram believes that Netaji is Netaji and Ram believes that Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose express the same proposition and cannot differ in truth value. But Ram believes that Netaji is Netaji could be true while Ram believes that Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose is false. Therefore, the Millian Theory is incorrect. Notice that this objection relies on the claim that Ram believes that Netaji is Netaji and Ram believes that Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose can differ in truth value, whereas the previous objection relied on the claim that Netaji is Netaji and Netaji is Subhash Chandra Bose differ in cognitive significance.

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[7] J.S. Mill, '*A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive*', in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.29

The third major argument is the Objection from Meaningful Sentences Containing Non Referring Names. The name 'Unicorn' does not refer. Therefore, Millianism entails that it is meaningless. Thus, if Millianism is correct, then sentence Unicorn flies contains a meaningless word. But if Unicorn flies contains a meaningless word, then Unicorn flies as a whole is meaningless. Therefore, if Millianism is correct, then sentence Unicorn flies is meaningless. But Unicorn flies are clearly meaningful.

The four arguments, the Objection from Negative Existential, is closely related to the previous argument. The example Unicorn does not exist is in not consistent with the view of Mill. If the Millian Theory is correct, then 'Unicorn' and the sentence Unicorn does not exist are meaningless. If Unicorn does not exist is meaningless, then it is not true. But Unicorn does not exist is true. Therefore, the Millian Theory is incorrect. Notice that the preceding objection relies on the claim that 'Unicorn' does not refer is meaningful, whereas this objection relies on the claim that Unicorn does not exist is true.[8]

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