ABSTRACT. After presenting a variety of arguments in support of the idea that ordinary names are indexical, I respond to John Perry’s recent arguments against the indexicality of names. I conclude by indicating some connections between the theory of names defended here and Wittgenstein’s observations on naming, and suggest that the latter may have been misconstrued in the literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Plainly names can and usually do vary in terms of what literal contents they express across the various contexts in which they get used. The challenge for an indexical account of names is to show that a name is unambiguous – i.e., that it retains a single meaning across a range of uses with respect to which its literal content varies.1 For only expressions that vary in literal content without varying in meaning count as indexicals.2

Orthodoxy has it that the content variability of a name like ‘David’ or ‘Chestertown’ is not of the monosemous variety. By way of defending this received view, John Perry begins by observing that

[w]hen a person or thing is assigned a name, a permissive convention is established: that name may be used to designate that person. / . . . When a name is used in a conversation or text to refer to a given person, the speaker is exploiting a permissive convention of this sort. A single name like ‘David’ may be associated with hundreds of thousands of people by different permissive conventions. In the abstract, the problem of knowing which conventions are being exploited when one apprehends a token containing the word ‘David’ are considerable. . . . But usually various factors work to make the use of proper names a practical way of talking about things. I only know a small minority of the Davids that can be designated with ‘David’: the ones I know overlap in fairly predictable ways with the ones known by people I regularly meet in various contexts; principles of charity dictate that I take my interlocutors to be designating Davids that might have, or might be taken to have, the properties that are being predicated of the David in question; and I can always just ask.

So far, Perry’s observations would seem to lend some intuitive support to the idea that names are indexicals, relying for their contents on such contextual factors as might raise a particular bearer of a name to prominence (in a given context). But Perry continues:
The role of context in resolving the issues of which naming conventions are being exploited is quite different from its role with indexicals. In the case of indexicals, the meaning of a given expression determines that certain specific contextual relationships to the utterance and utterer – who is speaking, or to whom, or when – determine designation. Different facts are relevant for different indexicals, and the meaning of the indexical determines which. Names don’t work like this. The difference between ‘David’ and ‘Harold’ is not that they are tied, by their meanings, to different relationships to the utterance or utterer. The role of context is simply to help us narrow down the possibilities for the permissive conventions that are being exploited.

If we have to give this phenomenon a familiar name, it would be “ambiguity.” The same name has many different meanings; as with ambiguous expressions, the role of context is to help us determine which meaning is relevant in a given use, rather than to supply a specific type of fact called for by the relevant meaning. There are many differences between the phenomenon in question and what we usually call “ambiguity” however. Paradigm ambiguous expressions have only a few meanings, most of which are known to people who use the expression, or can be easily found by looking in a good dictionary. One can realistically aspire to knowing most of the meanings of many words. Many names have thousands of meanings – that is, there are thousands of individuals that they are used to designate, exploiting various permissive conventions. People who use a given name will be ignorant of the vast majority of its meanings, and it would be silly to aspire to know most of them. For help in discovering or narrowing the possibilities in particular cases one might use a phonebook, or even an encyclopedia, but not a dictionary.

So with names we have ambiguity, not indexicality.3

We make a detailed assessment of Perry’s arguments against the idea that names are indexicals below, in §2. But it may be worth our while to pause here and ask why, if names really are merely ambiguous, they differ in the ways that Perry indicates from expressions that we normally think of as ambiguous. Why, for example, doesn’t a good dictionary list up all of the (supposedly) many meanings of a name, given that it is so unstinting in the case of a standardly recognized ambiguous term? Perhaps considerations of material economy and other practical limitations make it unfeasible to include all of the (again, supposedly) many meanings of a name like ‘David’; but surely the task is not so daunting when it comes to a name like ‘Cleopatra’ or ‘Willard Van Orman Quine.’ Are we to account for the absence of these terms from the O.E.D. as a consequence of their obsolescence or marginality? But this is a book that contains an entry for ‘mammothrept.’

The fact that we do not refer to a dictionary but rather rely on contextual cues to ascertain the content of a name in a given utterance lends prima facie credibility to the idea that names are not ambiguous, but indexical. This idea receives further intuitive support from the semantics of various “missing link” expressions that occupy a sort of middle-ground between canonical indexicals and names of the most ordinary sort. Consider the expressions ‘Dad,’ ‘Colonel,’ and ‘Her Ladyship,’ for example. The rules