Presuppositions and Scope[*]

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Within the philosophy of language, names and descriptions are traditionally taken to represent different paradigms of reference. Many philosophers draw a sharp contrast between the way speakers use names to talk about individuals and the way they use definite descriptions to do so. A proper name is used to pick out one specific individual. A definite description, on the other hand, provides a general formula for picking out distinct individuals in different situations. Metaphorically, a name is a tag attached to an individual, whereas a definite description is a set of instructions for finding an individual that satisfies some criterion.

This difference between names and descriptions is said to account for a well-known fact: descriptions exhibit narrow-scope readings with respect to modal operators while names do not. Here is an example in which a definite description has what is normally considered a scope ambiguity with a modal operator.

(1) Mary-Sue could have been married to the president.

Imagine (1) being uttered in a situation in which Grover Cleveland is the president. On one reading, (1) could be made true by a possible situation in which a) Grover Cleveland is married to Mary-Sue and b) Grover Cleveland is not president. This is the *wide-scope* reading of "the president" since it picks out the individual satisfying the role in the actual world, regardless of whether he satisfies it in the possibilities considered. On another reading, (1) could be true because of a possible situation in which Mary-Sue is married to someone else, say Jake, who is president in that possible situation. This is

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the *narrow-scope* reading of "the president" since the description picks up its referent within the possible situation considered.

Consider, by contrast, what happens if we replace the description in (1) with a proper name:

(2)   Mary-Sue could have been married to Grover Cleveland.

There is no way of understanding (2) as having two different readings analogous to those of (1). Even if, as a matter of their syntax, proper names can have different scope with respect to modal operators, there are no different truth-conditional readings corresponding to the different scopes the name can take.

The standard picture of names and descriptions explains thisdifference between them. Modal operators are generally taken to quantify over different possible situations. Since names are tags linked to individuals while descriptions are instructions for finding an individual in a given situation, only the latter can pick out different individuals across different possible situations. This line of reasoning forms the basis of Kripke's famous modal argument for the claim that names cannot be semantically equivalent to descriptions[1]

This paper centers on a simple observation: scope ambiguities between definite descriptions and modal operators are only sometimes available (or, at least, are only sometimes apparent). It turns out that the narrow-scope readings of definite descriptions within modal operators are only available when the common ground—the mutual beliefs of the conversational participants—includes the proposition that across a wide range of possible situations the descriptive content has a unique satisfier.

One task of this paper is to give a principled explanation of this observation. What

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[1]Kripke, "Naming and Necessity" in G. and D. Davidson, eds, *Semantics of Natural Language* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972), pp. 253–355. The modal argument is widely discussed in the philosophy of language: e.g. Leanard Linksy, *Oblique Contexts* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1983); Scott Soames, *Beyond Rigidity* (Oxford: OUP, 1986); and Jason Stanley, "Names and Rigid Designation," in B. and C. Wright eds., A Companion to the Philosophy of Language, pages 555–585. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

sort of explanation is available depends on our understanding of the semantics and pragmatics of definite descriptions. For this reason, it will be necessary to look at different accounts of definite descriptions. I consider two basic views of descriptions: the Russellian view, which treats definite descriptions as a kind of quantifier, and the presuppositional account, which treats them as expressions that presuppose the uniqueness or salience of an object. (While these views can, in some respects, be reconciled, they also represent very different perspectives on descriptions.) I argue that the Russellian view of descriptions, unaugmented, lacks the resources to predict correctly the availability of the narrow-scope reading of descriptions. By contrast, presuppositional accounts of definite descriptions *can* make the right predictions. To show this I discuss how presuppositions interact with modal operators.

The remainder of the paper relates this account of definite descriptions and modals to the contemporary debate about the semantics of proper names. I argue that, once we adopt a presuppositional account of descriptions, the modal argument against descriptivist theories of names loses its force. To make this argument, I consider a treatment of proper names which construes them as linguistic devices akin to definite descriptions. According to this picture, both types of expressions are used to pick out individuals that satisfy some descriptive content. I show that this account accurately predicts the behavior of names with respect to modal operators.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 1 presents the empirical data on the scope ambiguities of definite descriptions and other operators. Sections 2 and 3 examine how the Russellian and presuppositional views of descriptions handle this data. Section 4 relates these facts about the scope of descriptions to the philosophical discussion about which propositions are expressed using sentences that include descriptions. Sections 5–7 consider the relationship between proper names and descriptions.

1   Descriptions Under Modal Operators

First, we need to look at the details of the interaction of definite descriptions with modal operators. The key observation here is that definite descriptions have distinct wide- and narrow-scope readings with respect to modal operators. Although this observation plays a central role in much of the philosophical discussion of names and descriptions, there is little in the way of detailed study of the phenomenon.[2]

It will be useful to think of modal operators—like "must" and "might"—as quantifiers over possible worlds (or situations). To say that something *must* happen is to say that in all possible worlds it does happen. To say that something *can* happen is to say that there is a possible world (or situation) in which it does happen. Of course, modality comes in different flavors: modal operators may be read metaphysically, epistemically, or deontically. In this paper, I will concentrate on metaphysical modals—in keeping with much of the philosophical literature on names, descriptions, and modals.

Let's consider an example in order to get a grip on the narrow-scope readings of definite descriptions with respect to modal operators:

(3)   Aristotle might not have been the teacher of Alexander.

If we read the modal as having a metaphysical force, it is natural to think that (3) is true. But since Aristotle *was* the teacher of Alexander, the sentence can only be true if the description "the teacher of Alexander" picks up its reference *under* the modal operator. In other words, "the teacher of Alexander" must pick out different individuals

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[2]Within the semantics literature most discussion of the interaction of descriptions and modals centers around the phenomenon of modal subordination. Here is an example of modal subordination:

> A bear might come in to the cabin. The bear would eat you.

The modal in the second sentence, although universal in force, is only interpreted relative to the worlds involving the possibility mentioned in the first sentence, see, for instance, Craige Roberts, "Modal Subordination and Pronomial Anaphora in Discourse," *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 12 (1989): 685–721. In this paper, I will not discuss either this phenomenon or anaphoric uses of definite descriptions like the use of "the bear" in the second sentence, which refers back to the indefinite "a bear" in the first sentence.

in the different worlds over which the modal operator quantifies. The truth of (3) is then established by the existence of a possible world in which the description "the teacher of Alexander" picks out someone besides Aristotle. In that possible world, Aristotle is not the teacher of Alexander. By contrast, the wide-scope reading of the description could not possibly be true. This is because, on the wide-scope reading, "the teacher of Alexander" picks out its referent in the actual world. But, in this case, it picks out Aristotle and the sentence would then assert that in some possible world Aristotle is not Aristotle, which is false.

Before moving on let me make a cautionary note. Sometimes the narrow-scope reading of a sentence containing a description and a modal may not be distinguishable from the wide-scope reading. If the sentence only quantifies over possible worlds across which one and the same person satisfies the description, it will be impossible to tell from the truth-conditions of the sentence whether the description within it takes narrow or wide scope. For this reason, all of my claims about when we can or cannot get a narrow-scope reading of a sentence apply only to contexts in which the different scopes have an effect on the truth-conditions of the sentence.

1.1   Role-type vs. Particularized Descriptions

Example (3) in the previous section demonstrates that some definite descriptions have narrow-scope readings under modal operators. But the modal argument, as we shall see, relies on the claim that this is *generally* true of definite descriptions and this is the claim I wish to dispute. In order to do so, I need to make a distinction between two kinds of definite descriptions, which I call *role-type* and *particularized* descriptions.

One conceptual tool necessary to formulate this distinction is the idea of the *common ground*.[3] The common ground consists of all the propositions that are taken for granted by all the participants in a conversation. When I am talking to someone in a train

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[3]Robert Stalnaker, "Pragmatic Presupposition" in M. K. Munitz and P. K. Unger, eds., *Semantics and Philosophy* (New York: NYU, 1974); "Assertion" in P. Cole, ed., *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 9 (New York: Academic Press, 1978); "Common Ground," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25 (2002): 701–721.

station, for instance, the proposition that we are in a train station is generally part of the common ground. A proposition need not actually be believed to count as part of the common ground, but the participants must at least pretend to believe it or must use it as a working assumption. There is also an iterative aspect to the common ground: When a proposition is in the common ground it is not only mutually assumed to be true by participants of a conversation, but also mutually assumed to be mutually assumed to be true, and mutually assumed to be mutually assumed to be mutually assumed to be true, and so on.

A description is a *role-type description* if it is part of the common ground that there is exactly one person (or one salient person) satisfying the descriptive content across a range of relevant metaphysically possible situations and that the satisfier sometimes varies from situation to situation.[4] Some examples of role-type descriptions are "the family lawyer," "the mayor," "the president," "the tallest pilot," and "the director." With role-type descriptions, we usually know independently of the specific conversational situation that the descriptive content is satisfied uniquely across other possible situations: It is part of general knowledge that cities generally have one mayor, countries one president, and so on. Of course, many role-type descriptions are incomplete in the sense that they need to be augmented by an implicit specification of the particular role in question—so, for instance, "the president" might be used to mean "the president of the US" or the "the president of the board of trustees." Likewise superlative descriptions, such as "the tallest man," require some domain within which they operate: "the tallest man" might mean "the tallest man in the room," or "the tallest man in the galaxy." But the basic criterion stands: a role-type description is a description for which it is part of the common ground both that the content of the (completed) description is uniquely satisfied across a wide range of possible situations and that the satisfier varies amongst these situations.

Particularized descriptions are simply those descriptions that are not role-type de-

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[4]Note that while the number of metaphysically possible situations may be great, only certain situations are relevant when we use modals in normal speech with their metaphysical force.

scriptions. The mark of a particularized description, then, is that it is *not* part of the common ground that the descriptive content has a unique but varying satisfier across a whole range of relevant metaphysically possible situations. Descriptions whose only content consists in general properties shared by many different individuals tend to be particularized descriptions, such as, "the tall boy," "the dog," and "the loose-fitting cap." Descriptions that refer to people by their physical location or what they did at some point are also usually particularized, such as, "the man I met yesterday," "the person over there," and "the cat in the basement." The reason these descriptions count as particularized—in ordinary contexts—is that we can only know that there is a single most salient individual satisfying the descriptive content (and thus the description picks some individual out) by having some sort of knowledge particular to the narrow conversational context (e.g. for "the tall boy" we must know that there happens to be exactly one tall boy around). I might further note that particularized descriptions may also be "incomplete" in the sense that one might naturally fill out descriptions like "the tall man" with extra information such as "in this room."[5]

Whether a description counts as particularized or role-type depends upon what the common ground is. This means that corresponding to almost any particularized description there is some conceivable conversational context in which that description would count as a role-type description, and vice versa. So the distinction is not one between different types of linguistic expressions, but between different types of expression/context pairs. However, certain descriptions cast themselves more naturally as one sort or the other. When I give an example it will be clear if I mean it to be particularized or not.

It is worth noting that the role-type/particularized distinction is not the famous distinction between referential and attributive uses of descriptions introduced by Keith Donnellan.[6] On Donnellan's scheme, roughly speaking, attributive descriptions are used

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[5]How incomplete descriptions are dealt with is a matter of much controversy within formal semantics and philosophy of language The problem is discussed, among other places, in Scott Soames, "Incomplete Definite Descriptions," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 27 (1989): 349375.

[6]"Reference and Definite Descriptions," *Philosophical Review*, 75 (1966):281304.

to speak of whoever satisfies the predicative content of a description, whereas referential descriptions are used to refer to known individuals. Whether a definite description falls on one side or the other of Donnellan's distinction depends on how it is *used*; how it is classified according to my distinction depends, instead, upon the relationship between the common ground and the predicative content of a description. Classification according to my distinction is independent of how a description is used, and, so, is independent of how it sits with regard to Donnellan's distinction. (But there may be points of contact. For instance, when a description is used attributively the conversational participants typically assume, or pretend to, that across different epistemically or different metaphysically possible situations different individuals would satisfy the descriptive content.[7] Thus it may be that attributive uses are only possible with role-type descriptions. I discuss these points in greater detail in Section 4.)

As it happens, there is interesting evidence of the linguistic significance of my distinction. Christopher Lyons reports that a northern Frisian dialect, Fering, seems to mark the distinction by using different articles to signify descriptions of the two sorts.[8] Here is what he says about the use of the two definite determiners—the D- and the A-articles—in Fering:

> In general the D-article is used where the identity of the referent is to be found by searching the spatio-temporal or textual context. The referent, or a prior reference to it, is there to be picked out, and in some cases distinguished from other entities satisfying the same description. . . . The A-article is used as a role-type one, and where, given the hearer's general knowledge or knowledge of the wider situation and of appropriate associations, the description is enough to single out the referent without the need for ostension.
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> (p. 163)

Whatever one thinks of the D-article, the A-article is used to mark descriptions that

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[7] I think one can generalize the notion of role-type and particularized descriptions to epistemically possible situations in addition to metaphysically possible ones, though I do not explore that here.

[8] Lyons, *Definiteness* (Cambridge: CUP 1999).

seem a lot like role-type descriptions. So there is evidence that role-type descriptions form a natural pragmatic category capable of being marked in a language with its own article.

1.2   Role-type and Particularized Descriptions with Modals

Now, as we have seen, role-type descriptions allow narrow-scope readings with respect to modal operators, as in (3), repeated here:

(3)   Aristotle might not have been the teacher of Alexander.

The description from (3), "the teacher of Alexander" can easily be a role-type description since it can be part of the common ground that across a wide range of possible worlds Alexander would have had a teacher, but not necessarily the same teacher (for example, a different student of Plato might have been chosen instead to be Alexander's teacher). The question I turn to now is whether particularized descriptions exhibit the same sort of behavior with regard to modal operators as role-type descriptions do.

Let's look at an example. Suppose that I went to a reception at the Met last night. At the reception, we can suppose, I talked to many different people for brief periods of time. Now, suppose that I learn that my old friend Hans was due to come to the reception but that he didn't make it because his plane was delayed. Let us suppose that for this reason it is a relevant *possibility* that Hans could have made it to the reception, and that, if this were the case, I would have talked to him all night at the reception. This possible situation, if it were actual, is one which I could aptly describe with this sentence:

(4)   Hans is the person I talked to the whole time.

Now suppose that I want to express to someone at the party that I consider (4) to be a possibility. One might think that I could do this by uttering a version of (4) with a possibility modal:

(5)   Hans might have been the person I talked to the whole time.

There is, however, something very odd about using (5) to express the possibility of a situation in which (4) is true (assuming there is actually no one who I talked to the whole time). Indeed, if I utter (5) at the party, I will probably confuse my audience. (I will discuss a bit later how one might try to make sense of such utterances.) This oddness is quite surprising, however. If the definite description "the person I talked to the whole time" can have scope within the modal operator, then we would expect that (5) would express the possibility of a situation within which (4) is true. Since such a situation *is* possible we would expect the utterance to be not only felicitous but also true. However, for some reason this narrow-scope reading of the description "the person I talked to the whole time" is not actually available.[9] (The wide-scope reading of the description is quite hard to get as well since there is no person in the actual situation the description could refer to.)

Let's consider another example. Suppose that throughout an entire dinner party Siegfried does not eat anything, and is unique in this regard. Suppose that I have another friend, say Siegmund, who also would not have eaten anything if he had been at the dinner. Now, suppose I say something like this:

(6)   I might have enjoyed talking to the person fasting through the dinner.

It does not seem like I could mean anything but that I might have enjoyed talking to Siegfried by an utterance of (6). This is true even if it is is possible that Siegmund could have come and Siegfried not come. In this possible situation, of course, Siegmund would have been the only person fasting. Nonetheless, it does not seem like (6) can easily express the proposition that there is a possible situation in which I would have enjoyed talking to *whoever* was unique in fasting at the dinner, Siegmund, Siegfried or someone else entirely. In this respect we cannot easily get the narrow-scope reading of the description "the person fasting through the dinner."

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[9]Those familiar with presuppositions may not be surprised by this, since this is, roughly speaking, *predicted* by the presuppositional theory of descriptions.

We can, however, create conversational backgrounds within which "the person I talked to the whole time" has a narrow-scope reading in (5) and "the person fasting through the dinner" has a narrow-scope reading in (6). First take (5) again:

(5)   Hans might have been the person I talked to the whole time.

Suppose that it is part of the common ground that I generally talk to one person throughout an entire evening (because, for instance, I always start an argument with someone about politics which lasts the whole evening). In this case, I could utter (5) in order to express the proposition that if Hans had come he would have filled the role of being the person I talked to all night. However, this is a case in which "the person I talked to the whole time," which would usually be a particularized description, acts as a role-type description since it indicates a role which is uniquely filled across many relevant counterfactual situations.[10]

The situation is similar for (6):

(6)   I might have enjoyed talking to the person fasting through the dinner.

If we can take it for granted that there is usually exactly one person fasting at such dinners, or that the organizers had intended to invite exactly one person who wouldn't eat, though not any specific person, then the narrow-scope reading of (6) is available. However, without such an assumption the reading is very hard to get.

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[10]I can only think of one other circumstance in which the description "the man I talked to the whole time" could have a non-rigid, narrow-scope reading in an utterance of (5). This other case is the one in which the description "the person I talked to the whole time" has already been introduced in either its definite or indefinite form in the conversation. For instance, instead of just saying (5) I might have said (1):

(1)   I could have talked to a person the whole time. Hans might have been the person I talked to the whole time.

If I utter (1) it seems that the description in the second sentence can have a narrow-scope reading, and thus the utterance might express something true. However, in this case, the definite description is anaphorically linked to the indefinite description that precedes it. I want to put aside these anaphoric uses of descriptions as they involve the description inheriting properties from the original use.

We have seen, then, that in order to get a narrow-scope reading of a definite description we need to treat it as a role-type one. Sometimes in response to an utterance the audience changes their assumptions, and, hence the common ground through the process of *accommodation*.[11] This process of accommodation can lead the audience to treat a description as a role-type one even if prior to the utterance it is not part of the common ground that the description designates a role. Here is an example in which such accommodation might occur. Suppose I utter (7) when discussing a party I have just been to:

(7) If I had gotten there earlier I might have been the person in charge of hats.

My audience would not take me just to be asserting that if I had gotten to the party earlier I would, by myself, have taken charge of the hats. Rather, they must *also* assume that across a whole range of different possible ways in which the party could have transpired there would have been one person who saw to the hats. Making this assumption, through accommodation, the audience can then understand my assertion in (7) to be the assertion that if I had gotten to the party earlier I would have played the role of dealing with the hats.

To understand better the behavior of descriptions within modal operators it is worth comparing sentences with particularized descriptions with sentences containing a typical role-type description. Here is one:

(8) Adlai Stevenson might have been the president.

There is a natural reading of (8) on which the role-type description "the president" has narrow scope. It is true, for instance, if there are relevant possible worlds where Stevenson beats Eisenhower. These are worlds in which Stevenson is "the president." But that sort of reading, i.e. the narrow-scope one, is exactly the reading we do not find for (5), (6), or (7) without choosing backgrounds in which the descriptions act as role-type ones.

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[11]See David K. Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8 (1979): pp. 339–59; and Stalnaker, "Common Ground."

1.3   Role-type/Particularized and Adverbs of Quantification

Particularized and role-type definite descriptions also differ in their behavior with respect to adverbs of quantification, such as "sometimes", "usually", and "generally." Role-type descriptions easily allow quantification over different satisfiers whereas particularized descriptions do not:

(9)   The best student is usually reclusive.

(10)   The mayor is usually a Republican.

(11)   The man in the car is usually nice.

(12)   The tall solider from France is usually violent.

Both (9) and (10) exhibit two different readings corresponding to whether or not the descriptions get their reference under the adverb of quantification. One reading of (9) has it that a particular student, who is the best, usually acts reclusively; on the other reading, most of the students who are the best, say in different years or classes, are reclusive. (10) exhibits a similar ambiguity. The situation is different with (11) and (12), which prefer to be read as being about one particular person. For example, in (11), "the man in the car" must pick out the actual person satisfying the description, unless it can be taken for granted that there is a entire class of relevant situations in which there is exactly one man in a car. In other words, the description "the man in the car" must act as a role-type one in order to get narrow scope. Likewise, to get (12) to quantify over different individuals one has to imagine there being a recognized role: the tall solider from France.

The generalization is that role-type descriptions but not particularized descriptions can have narrow scope with respect to modal operators and adverbs of quantification. The explanation of this observation requires us to delve into some of the details of different accounts of descriptions. In the next section I sketch the Russellian account and argue that it does not provide us with the tools needed to explain the data.

2   Russellian Descriptions and Scope Ambiguities

Russell's approach was to treat definite descriptions as a form of quantifier.[12] While the indefinite description, "an F" simply introduces existential quantification, $\exists x \mathrm{F} x$, into a rendering of the meaning of a sentence in first-order logic, the definite description is more complicated.[13] Russell claimed that definite descriptions are used to assert not just that there is an x such that $\mathrm{F}x$ but also that there is only one x such that $\mathrm{F}x$. So, we can say that "the F" expresses something equivalent to $\exists x(\mathrm{F}x \& \forall y(\mathrm{F}y \rightarrow y = x))$. I will abbreviate all this as $[\iota x : \mathrm{F}x]$. These quantifiers are introduced into a *logical form* of a sentence, which, for our purposes here, is a representation in logical notation (or something approximating logical notation) of a proposition that can be expressed by the sentence.

An important aspect of Russell's view of descriptions is that on this view definite descriptions can have scope at different places in a sentence. Russell's view, in fact, *predicts* certain systematic ambiguities in sentences containing a description and another quantifier. For, a critical component of the Russellian view is that a definite description introduces into the logical form of a sentence both a quantificational phrase, $[\iota x : \mathrm{F}x]$, and a variable x which is bound by it. This quantificational phrase can move within the logical form of a sentence, on the Russellian view, and this means that its scopal position with regard to any other quantifiers and operators in the sentence may vary. Such a sentence may be read in different ways depending on the scope that the description is taken to have.[14]

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[12]A comprehensive discussion and defense of the Russellian view is given by Stephen Neale, *Descriptions* (Cambridge: MIT, 1990).

[13]This treatment ignores some complications of Russell's actual position. Russell did not really think "a F" (or "the F") was equivalent to any one part of the logical form of a sentence. However, I am more interested here in the quantificational view inspired by Russell than in Russell's view itself.

[14]Recently many have attempted to integrate the Russellian account of quantifier scope with linguistic research into syntactic movement, along the the lines of Robert May, *Logical Form: Its Structure and Derivation* (Cambridge: MIT, 1985). However, for our purposes these syntactically oriented reformulations of the Russellian view are not relevantly different from the standard Russellian view. This is

As an example consider this sentence:

(13)   A man met the president.

The Russellian may render this sentence thus:

(14) $\exists x \ [\iota y : \text{president} y] \ x \text{ met } y.$

Or alternatively, he may render it thus:

(15) $[\iota y : \text{president} y] \ \exists x \ x \text{ met } y.$

The only relevant quantifiers at work here are existential quantifiers. Since commuting existential quantifiers has no effect on meaning, these different scopes for the definite description do not, in this case, correspond to different truth-conditions for the sentence. But this is not always the case. As we shall see, the different scopal readings predicted by the Russellian often do correspond to different truth-conditions for a sentence.

Now consider modal operators. We can treat modal operators as functions that take propositions and return propositions. There are two kinds of modal operators, the necessity operator, $\square$, and the possibility operator, $\diamond$. If we take these operators to have their standard meanings, $\square$ returns a proposition that is true in a world w just in the case the input proposition is true in all the worlds possible with respect to w and $\diamond$ returns a proposition that is true in a world w just in case the input proposition is true in at least one world possible with respect to w.

The Russellian view of descriptions in combination with this quantificational view of modal operators predicts that there will be certain systematic ambiguities in sentences that contain descriptions under modal operators. Here is a sentence containing a description and a modal operator:

(16)   The president might have been wise.

There are at least two different readings for (16): On one reading, it says of the actual president that there is a possible world in which he or she is wise. This reading is

especially true because there are few known syntactic restrictions on the scope of definite descriptions.

captured by the formula (17) on which "the president" takes wide scope over the modal operator:

(17) $[\iota x : \text{President}x](\diamond\text{wise}x)$

On the other reading of (16), the sentence is true just in case there is a possible world in which the person who is president within that possible world is wise, whoever he or she may be. The logical form of this reading is captured by the formula in which the description gets scope under the modal operator:

(18) $\diamond [\iota x : \text{President}x](\text{wise}x)$

A major attraction of the Russellian view of definite descriptions is that it predicts the appearance of these readings by allowing quantifiers to have different scopes on different readings of a given sentence.

But, it is this very mechanism of quantifier scope-taking that creates problems for the Russellian approach and its descendants. The Russellian view makes the *prima-facie* prediction that, for a given sentence, both higher and lower scope with respect to a metaphysical modal operator will be available to a definite description. We have seen already, however, that definite descriptions do not *generally* exhibit scope ambiguities with modal operators: They do so only when the descriptions are role-type ones. The Russellian view provides no obvious means for explaining why these different scopes are only *sometimes* available: any mechanism generating these different scopes should, as far as the Russellian is concerned, apply equally well to particularized and role-type descriptions. So the Russellian account, at first blush, makes the wrong prediction.

To make this argument clearer, it is worth considering a sentence with a description, which, in most contexts, lacks a scope ambiguity:

(19)   I might have married the deserter.

Someone who accepts the Russellian account of descriptions should expect there to be a scope ambiguity between the two quantificational devices, "the" and "might." The Russellian ought to anticipate both a wide-scope reading, on which the sentence says

that I might have married the unique actual deserter, and a narrow-scope reading, on which it says that there is a possible situation in which I marry a person who is unique in deserting in that situation. But, this second reading is obviously not available, unless we build in enough background information to turn the description "the deserter" into a role-type one.[15] So it turns out that (19) is ambiguous only in certain contexts (i.e. only in combination with certain common grounds).

In response, the Russellian could suggest that the narrow-scope reading is unavailable in these contexts for pragmatic reasons; after all, not every reading of a conceivably ambiguous sentence is always found in every conversational context. But for an appeal to pragmatics to provide more than just a hand-wavy avoidance of criticism, a serious account of the data must be provided.

One such account might claim that the proposition expressed by the narrow-scope reading is only plausibly assertable in cases where the description is a role-type one. But I doubt that this is correct. Consider, for instance, these examples:

(20)   Saint-Simon could have been the man I met at the zoo.

(21)   Filibert could have been the person in court.

The Russellian predicts very sensible narrow-scope readings for both of these sentences. Let us restrict our attention to the metaphysical readings of the modals. The sentence (20), on the narrow-scope reading, asserts that Saint-Simon could have been a man I met at the zoo and been unique in being so; (21) says that Filibert could have been the only (relevant) person in court. Neither of these propositions is so peculiar as to be something one would not express. Nor do the situations in which one would express them require the descriptions to be role-type. Yet, (20) and (21) do not exhibit narrow-scope readings of their definite descriptions, unless the descriptions act as role-type ones.[16]

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[15]Again, there are actually two ways of making a narrow-scope reading available. One is to create enough background information to make "the deserter" a role-type description. The other is to precede (19) with a sentence like "Someone might have deserted." These might amount to the same thing, but it is not obvious that they do. See footnote 2.

[16]The wide-scope readings with metaphysical modals are also quite hard to get as they seem to

3   Presuppositional Descriptions and Scope Ambiguities

Since the basic Russellian view does not give us any clear way of explaining the data discussed above we need to examine presuppositional accounts of definite descriptions. In this section, I argue that a presuppositional account of definite descriptions explains the data concerning the scope of descriptions with respect to modal operators.

3.1   Presuppositions and Descriptions

I use "presupposition" to refer to an empirical phenomenon, not to any particular technical account of that phenomenon.[17] When a proposition is presupposed by a statement, the statement seems to suggest or imply the proposition without exactly asserting it. Take this sentence:

(22)   John went to the DMV too.

An utterance of (22) seems to carry some sort of strong commitment to the proposition that someone besides John went to the DMV: It would be ludicrous to assert (22) and

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assert that one person might have been another person. Of course, the descriptions in (20) and (21) may get narrow-scope readings if we think of the modals in the sentences as having *epistemic* force. I would argue that in these cases the descriptions act as role-types ones with respect to the epistemically possible worlds that the epistemic modals quantify over. However, I cannot defend this view here.

[17]Soames ["Presuppositions," in D. Gabbay and F. Guenther, eds., *Handbook of Philosophical Logic* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1989), vol. IV, pages 553–616] and David Beaver [*Presupposition and Assertion in Dynamic Semantics* (Stanford: CSLI, 2001)] review the linguistic evidence for presuppositions and the technical accounts of presupposition phenomena. Some are skeptical that there is any unified phenomenon deserving the name of presupposition, but I think the large amount of excellent research on presuppositions such as that reviewed in the articles cited can put such worries to rest. Nonetheless, there are undoubtedly differences between different kinds of presuppositions, such as those differences discussed in Mandy Simons, "On the Conversational Basis of Some Presuppositions," in R. Hastings, B. Jackson and Z. Zvolensky, eds., *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory 11* (Ithaca: CLC Publications, 2001).

to deny in the next breath that anyone besides John went to the DMV. Yet (22) does not *assert* the proposition to which it is in this way committed—nor could it happily be used to assert this proposition. Consider also this sentence:

(23)   My niece is a professional lutenist.

As in the case of (22), an utterance of (23) wouldn't seem, intuitively, to be an assertion that the speaker has a niece, though such an utterance would certainly imply it.

Expressions giving rise to this phenomenon—expressions like "too" and "my X" — are known as presupposition triggers. One striking feature of this class of expressions is that any presupposition that they trigger survives embedding under negation. Consider for instance the negation of (23):

(24)   It's not the case that my niece is a professional lutenist

Someone who utters (24) would still seem committed to the proposition that he has a niece. This phenomenon whereby a presupposition survives some operation on a sentence is called *presupposition projection.* And it occurs under other operators besides negation. Consider, for instance, the difference in semantic contribution between an assertion combined with a pronoun, "I have a wife and she...," and the simple noun phrase, "My wife...," in different contexts:

(25)   a. If I had a wife and she were rich I wouldn't be in debt.

       b. If my wife were rich I wouldn't be in debt.

(26)   a. Do I have a wife and is she rich?

       b. Is my wife rich?

(27)   a. It's possible that I have a wife and she is rich.

       b. It's possible that my wife is rich.

In (25b)–(27b) above, the presupposition that I have a wife survives the embedding within, respectively, a conditional, an interrogative, and a modal context. This accounts for the difference in meaning between all of the pairs above. It is the basic mark of

presupposition triggers that the presuppositions they generate are projected in this way. But, the details of projection phenomena, and the exact characteristics of the contexts in which it does and does not occur, go far beyond the scope of this paper.

It is widely supposed that uses of definite descriptions trigger presuppositions. In fact, definite descriptions were the expressions first observed to exhibit presuppositional behavior and the expressions for which the notion of presupposition was developed.[18] On the standard view, definite descriptions trigger the presupposition that there is a unique satisfier of the descriptive content in the contextually relevant domain. On a competing view, definite descriptions trigger the presupposition that there is a maximally salient item satisfying the descriptive content in the contextually relevant domain.[19] The differences between the two accounts of the content of the presuppositions of definite description are not very important for this discussion, and I will often switch between them.

I want to put aside, in this context, the case of felicitous uses of non-referring definite descriptions such as this:

(28)   I didn't see the king of France at Versailles, because there is no king of France.

There is much to say about such cases, but they do not challenge the basic observation that definite descriptions generally give rise to presuppositions of existence and uniqueness/familiarity.[20] For one thing, we can say that in sentences like (28) the presupposition is explicitly contradicted, and that when this happens certain presuppositions

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[18]Particularly in Strawson, "On Referring," *Mind*, LVIII (1956): 320–44.

[19]The classic statement of this view within the framework of formal semantics is Heim, *The Semantics of Definite and Indefinite Noun Phrases*, Ph.D. Thesis (MIT, 1982); a similar view is suggested in Lewis, "Scorekeeping." Zóltan Szabó ["Descriptions and Uniqueness," *Philosophical Studies*, 101 (200): 29–57] and Roberts ["Uniqueness in Definite Noun Phrases", *Linguistics and Philosophy* 26(2003): 287–350] have recently advocated novel versions of this view.

[20]Kai von Fintel ["Would You Believe It? The King of France is Back!" In M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout, eds., *Descriptions and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays on Definite and Indefinite Descriptions*, (Oxford: OUP, 2004)] discusses this problem and refers to much of the major literature on it.

disappear.

There is a further question we might ask about the presuppositions of definite descriptions besides the question of their content. Any account of definite descriptions must say something about what it is about definite descriptions that makes them trigger these presuppositions. One might think that the fact that definite descriptions trigger presuppositions of existence and uniqueness simply follows from the Russellian treatment of descriptions discussed in the previous section. However, the situation cannot be so simple. For on the Russellian view, definite descriptions are used to *assert* the existence and uniqueness of something satisfying the descriptive content. A defender of the simple Russellian view needs to explain why such assertions give rise to presuppositions with their particular projection behavior. Some have suggested that the presuppositional behavior of descriptions can be predicted from their Russellian truth-conditions by general pragmatic principles (Neale, p. 54). However, as far as I know, no one has substantiated this claim and there are serious obstacles to it. For instance, it is very hard for the Russellian to explain on pragmatic grounds the difference in communicative force between definite descriptions and explicit assertions of existence and uniqueness when embedded in conditionals. Here is a minimal pair to illustrate this problem:

(29)   If the king signed my pardon, I would be spared.

(30)   If there were one and only one king and he signed my pardon, I would be spared.

Clearly (29) but not (30) is best uttered in a situation in which it can be assumed that there is a unique king. If descriptions, however, just *assert* existence and uniqueness it is unclear why (29) but not (30) is inappropriate if it cannot be assumed that there is a king.

In response to such problems, we might instead treat the presupposition that a definite description triggers as an additional feature distinct from its normal truth-conditional content. In this case, we could maintain the Russellian account of definite descriptions and tack on to it the claim that definite descriptions also trigger presuppositions of existence and uniqueness. There are two problems with such a move. First of

all, it leads to a redundancy in our account of definite descriptions since we must now take them to both presuppose *and* assert existence and uniqueness. Second, the account does nothing to explain *why* definite descriptions trigger the particular presuppositions that they do.

In response to these problems we might instead suppose that a definite description is a term whose *function* is to pick out the thing that satisfies the presupposition (i.e. the unique/uniquely salient thing satisfying the descriptive content). In other words, we might suppose that [the F] is equivalent to [x s.t. x is the thing uniquely salient in satisfying F].[21] I will call this view the presuppositional view of descriptions. On it, the presupposition of a description is not an extra component of the meaning of the description but rather arises from the fact that the semantic value of a description is undefined when the presupposition is not satisfied.[22] On this view, the *function* of a definite description is to refer to a uniquely salient item; if it cannot do that, then its use is infelicitous. The task then left to the theorist is to explain the projection behavior of the presuppositions of descriptions based on this sort of story. There is much promising work in this direction, by Heim,[23] van der Sandt[24] and others. I will not, however, go into the details of presupposition projection except for the case of definite descriptions appearing under modal operators and adverbs of quantification.

A note: In my earlier discussion of the relationship between descriptions and modal operators, I treated the different readings of definite descriptions under modal operators as if they were the result of quantifier-scope ambiguities. One might wonder, however: If descriptions are not standard quantifiers, how can they nonetheless have different scopes with respect to other operators? This is basically a technical question and so its

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[21]But I still wish to remain neutral on the question of whether descriptions are really object-referring expressions or rather contribute descriptive modes of presentation, an issue I turn to in the next section.

[22]There are both semantic and pragmatic versions of this view, as discussed in Stalnaker, "Pragmatic Presuppositions," but the differences between them are not important here.

[23]"On the Projection Problem for Presuppositions," in D. Flickinger and M. Wescoat, eds., *WCCFL 2: Second Annual West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1983) pp. 114–125

[24]"Presuppostion Projection as Anaphora Resolution," *Journal of Semantics*, 9 (1992): 333–377.

answer is also technical.[25] I will continue to refer to the different readings of sentences with descriptions and modal operators as the wide- and narrow-scope readings even if they are not manifestations of the usual quantifier scope ambiguities posited by the Russellian.

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[25]There are a variety of different means of representing the different scopes descriptions can take besides the usual Russellian way. Here are two methods: First, we can think of descriptions as including a world variable that can, but need not, be bound by modal operators or adverbs of quantification, as in Heim, "Artikel und Definitheit," in A. v. Stechow and D. Wunderlich (eds.), *Semantics: An International Handbook of Contemporary Research.* (Amsterdam: de Gruyter, 1991). An approximation of the logical form of a narrow-scope reading of sentence (1) would be represented by something like (2), where the description's semantic value is in brackets. (Again, I am not trying to take a stand on the issue of what exactly the semantic value of the description is—in particular whether it is exhausted by the object it refers to or rather involves a mode of presentation. I elaborate on these issues in section 4, below.)

(1)   The mayor could be a woman.

(2) $\exists$ world w, s.t. [the unique mayor in w] is a woman.

On the wide-scope reading we simply attach the description to the actual world, @, instead of letting it be bound by the modal operator:

(3) $\exists$ a world w, s.t. [the unique mayor in @] is a woman.

Alternatively, we can use the approach of van der Sandt and Beaver and treat the presupposition itself as scoping to different positions while binding a variable that is left in the place of the description. In the following examples I use x to represent this variable, while putting the presupposition in parentheses and allowing its location to determine where it gets satisfied. Here is the narrow-scope reading, with the presupposition staying within the modal operator:

(4) $\diamond$ ($\exists x$, x is a unique mayor) and x is a woman.

On the wide-scope reading, the presupposition simply comes out of the modal operator into the front of the sentence:

(5)   ($\exists x$, x is a unique mayor) $\diamond$ x is a woman.

3.2   Modals, Adverbs of Quantification, and Presuppositions

My goal in this section is to explain the fact that only role-type descriptions can have narrow scope under modal operators. I'll do this by appealing to the presuppositional view of definite descriptions I have just presented.

First, I want to illustrate the general idea by looking at adverbs of quantification—expressions like "always" and "usually"—and then I will move on to modal operators. Adverbs of quantification can be treated as quantificational expressions that are very similar to modals. While modal operators quantify over possible worlds, adverbs of quantification quantify over situations—where a situation is something smaller than an entire world.[26] A sentence of the form "always X" is, on this approach, equivalent to a sentence of the form "in all situations, X." (Just as, on the usual quantificational approach to modality, "it must be the case that X" is equivalent to "in all possible worlds X.")

As we saw in Section 1.3, definite descriptions exhibit scope ambiguities with respect to adverbs of quantification. Consider, for instance, this sentence:

(31)   The mayor is always happy.

On the wide-scope reading, (31) is used to make a statement about the current mayor and says that in all (relevant) situations he or she is happy. On the narrow-scope reading, (31) is used to assert that in any relevant situation, whoever the mayor is in that situation, he or she is happy.

Now, as I explained above, any use of a definite description triggers some sort of presupposition, perhaps a presupposition to the effect that there is a uniquely salient satisfier of the descriptive content. Whether a particular use of a definite description is felicitous or not will depend on whether the presupposition is part of the common

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[26]von Fintel, "A Minimal Theory of Adverbial Quantification" in B. Partee and H. Kamp, eds., *Context Dependence in the Analysis of Linguistic Meaning: Proceedings of the Workshops in Prague* (Stuttgart: IMS Stuttgart Working Papers, 1995), pp. 153–193. I am making a departure from Lewis's ["Adverbs of Quantification," in E. Keenan, *Formal Semantics of Natural Language* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975) pp. 3–15] classic account of adverbs of quantification.

ground (i.e. is one of the mutual assumptions of the conversational participants) or can be added to the common ground through accommodation. In other words, what a speaker *presupposes*, his audience must be capable of *assuming*.

When a definite description appears under an adverb of quantification we add, so to speak, an extra layer of presupposition. To see how this is so, consider first the narrow-scope reading of the definite description "the mayor" under the adverb of quantification "always" in (31). According to the semantics of adverbs of quantification I am using here, to determine whether the sentence on this reading is true we would need to check the truth of the embedded sentence ("the mayor is happy") *in all the relevant situations*. In other words, the truth of the narrow-scope reading of (31) depends on the truth of (32) over a class of relevant situations:

(31)   The mayor is always happy.

(32)   The mayor is happy.

Now, normally, any use of "the mayor" triggers the presupposition that in the relevant circumstance there is one salient satisfier of the descriptive content, i.e. that there is one salient mayor. However, the narrow-scope reading of (31) does not just include *one* use of the description "the mayor." By this I mean that the description is not just used *once* to pick out an object. Rather an utterance of (31), on the narrow-scope reading of the description, makes use of the description to pick out an object in every situation being quantified over. So the presupposition of (31), on its narrow-scope reading, is that *across all the relevant situations* there is a unique mayor. Thus, when one intends (31) to have this narrow-scope reading, the audience must assume, or be capable of assuming, that this presupposition is satisfied (i.e. that across every relevant situation there is a unique mayor).[27]

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[27]This point also follows from any view which treats definite descriptions as having partially defined semantic values. If one treats definite descriptions as undefined when they have no unique referent (as on the semantic approach to presupposition), then (31) on the narrow-scope reading will be undefined unless there is a unique mayor in all the relevant situations.

The situation is different with the wide-scope reading of the description in (31). For if we intend (31) to have this reading we pick out the mayor salient in our current context and assert that he or she is happy in all the relevant situations. In this case the description is only being put to one use in the sentence: it picks out the actual mayor. So this sentence does not generate any extra presuppositions through the interaction of the definite description and the adverb of quantification. The sentence is fine as long as the common ground includes the proposition that there is a salient mayor, or as long as that proposition can be accommodated.

The critical point here is that, generally, a sentence for which the definite description is read as having wide scope with respect to an adverb of quantification triggers a different presupposition from a sentence for which the definite descriptions is read as having narrow scope. On the narrow-scope reading, the sentence triggers the presupposition that across all the relevant situations there is a unique satisfier of the descriptive content. On the wide-scope reading, by contrast, the sentence just triggers the presupposition that in the actual situation there is a unique satisfier of the descriptive content.

My central claim is that the different presuppositions of the sentence on the narrow- and wide-scope readings, respectively, determine which readings are available in a given conversational context. When a sentence is ambiguous and its different possible readings have different presuppositions, then we are only be able to get the reading(s) whose presupposition can be accommodated. Now, a particularized description is a description for which it is *not* assumed that there is a unique satisfier across the relevant situations. If the relationship between the common ground and the descriptive content has this feature then one cannot, without accommodation, get the narrow-scope reading of the description under an adverb of quantification. In such a case either the common ground must be changed (making the description a role-type one) or the other, wide-scope reading will be the only one available.

Consider, for instance, this sentence:

(33)   The man from Apple is often troublesome.

For "the man from Apple" to have narrow scope under the adverb of quantification in (33), the common ground needs to entail that there is a class of relevant situations in each of which the description picks out a uniquely salient person. If, for instance, it is part of the common ground that we often have meetings where Apple sends exactly one person, then the narrow-scope reading is possible. But this circumstance is one in which "the man from Apple" functions as a role-type description. When "the man from Apple" acts as a particularized description, by contrast, only the wide-scope reading is possible; that reading just requires that there be a uniquely salient man from Apple available in the actual situation.

Does this approach also cover the data concerning the scope of definite descriptions under modal operators? I think that it does. Recall that modal operators quantify over possible worlds or possible situations. Consider this sentence:

(34)   Susan could have been married to the man wearing a big red hat.

This sentence fails to have a narrow-scope reading in normal contexts when the modal has metaphysical force: (34) cannot easily be read to mean that Susan's actual husband might have been unique in wearing a big red hat.[28] The presupposition of the sentence with the narrow-scope reading is that in each possible world there is a unique, but potentially varying satisfier of the description.[29] However, in normal situations there is not an easily accessible set of possible worlds such that in each world some (different) person is wearing a big red hat. Of course, there are many metaphysically possible worlds where just one person is wearing a big red hat (in the relevant situation), but they do not form a natural modal domain that we can quantify over with modal operators.

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[28]It has a natural narrow-scope reading if we read the modal epistemically, however, epistemic modals raise different issues since the sets of worlds they quantify over are radically different.

[29]This assumes that the truth of the sentence depends upon what happens in *all* possible worlds, rather than just one possible world. This fact does not follow directly from the semantics of possibility modals since they are used to make an assertion of the form "there exists a possible world such that *x*." However, I would argue that, for semantic or pragmatic reasons, existential modals are nonetheless used to make statements about entire sets of possible worlds.

Moreover, the presupposition of the sentence on the narrow-scope reading, i.e. that in every relevant possible world there is unique person wearing a big red hat, is a bit too peculiar to come easily into play through accommodation, explaining our preference for the wide-scope reading. And, if we nonetheless accommodate this presupposition, the description becomes a role-type one.

The situation is different when we have, under a modal operator, a description like "the president." Here, the narrow-scope reading is easily accessible:

(35)   The president of the company might have been nicer.

The narrow-scope reading is available because we can naturally think that over a relevant set of possibilities the company would have had some president or other in each possibility. When we think of the modal as quantifying over these possibilities, the description "the president of the company" can get narrow scope with respect to the modal.

Let me review what I have been arguing. First, the Russellian account does not predict the systematic scope variations definite descriptions show with respect to modal operators. This is because the Russellian should, all else equal, expect that in any sentence with a modal operator and a description there is a scope ambiguity between them. Moreover, the limited distribution of readings that we find cannot easily be explained by pragmatics alone.

Second, presuppositional accounts of descriptions *can* explain the distribution we find. Adverbs of quantification and modal operators quantify over sets of situations (or worlds). Descriptions can get narrow scope if and only if the presupposition that there is a unique satisfier in every situation is satisfied. If this presupposition is satisfied, or can be accommodated, then we can get the narrow-scope reading, otherwise, we only get the wide-scope reading on which the description refers to an object in the current context.

4   Definite Descriptions and Propositional Content

Before moving on, I want to relate what I have said about definite descriptions to some general issues within the philosophy of language. Much of the work there is situated within a theoretical framework which derives from Frege and Russell. One of the central features of this framework is the view that utterances of sentences in contexts are used to communicate abstract objects called *propositions*. The philosophical literature on definite descriptions and proper names—the relation between the two being the subject of the remainder of this paper—focuses on the contribution these expressions make to the propositions expressed by utterances of sentences including them. On one popular conception, sentences containing singular terms can sometimes be used to communicate object-dependent propositions. These are propositions about some particular object. To put it graphically, the object itself—rather than just properties of the object—is part of these propositions. For instance, one might think that if there is a woman standing a few feet in front of me, I can say something like (36) to communicate a proposition about the woman herself, rather than about whoever might satisfy the description I use:

 (36)   The woman in front of me may be a journalist.

Other uses of singular terms in sentences do not communicate propositions about any particular object but speak about an object only by specifying some property it has. For instance, one can talk about "the owner of this car, whoever that might be." I will call propositions that are not about particular objects, *general* propositions.

The question I want to take up here is how the preceding discussion of the potential scope of definite descriptions relates to the philosophical discussion of the contribution of definite descriptions to propositions expressed using them.[30] Let me first recall that the distinction between particularized and role-type descriptions does not simply amount to the distinction between descriptions used to express object-dependent propositions (which are called *referential* uses of descriptions) and descriptions used to communicate

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[30]Donnellan "Reference and Definite Descriptions"; Kripke, "Speakers Reference and Semantic Reference," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 29 (1977): 255–276.

general propositions (which are called *attributive* uses of descriptions). For instance, "the president of the US" can be used to communicate an object-dependent proposition even when it functions as a role-type description.

(37) The president of the US likes madeira.

An utterance of (37) is potentially capable of expressing an object-dependent proposition about the current president of the US. So, it is not restricted to expressing a general proposition about the person happening to satisfy the description, despite the fact that the description itself is role-type.[31]

Likewise, consider a situation in which A) my potato salad was stolen in the middle of the night, B) I am sure that one person stole it, C) I am sure that if the thief had not stolen it no one else would have, and D) I have no idea who the thief is.

(38) The thief obviously liked Worcestershire sauce and thyme.

In these circumstances, by uttering (38), I may communicate a proposition about whoever satisfies a certain property, i.e. the property of being the unique thief in the current situation. But, the description is a particularized one, since in different (relevant) possible situations either the same (unknown) person satisfies the description or no one does.

Nonetheless, the difference between narrow- and wide-scope uses is correlated, to an extent, with the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. Any description which in a given case receives narrow scope with regard to a modal operator is generally not used to express an object-dependent proposition. This is because there is not *one* object such a sentence is used to talk about; rather the description seems to pick out different objects in different possible situations.[32] Wide-

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[31]Whether such uses of descriptions to express object-dependent propositions about individuals follow from the semantics of descriptions or rather depend on various pragmatic mechanisms, as Kripke suggests, is an entirely separate issue.

[32]Unless, of course, the narrow-scope reading picks out the same person in all the possible situations in which case it could be used to communicate a singular proposition.

scope uses of definite descriptions need not, on the other hand, express object-dependent propositions. In the context of the potato salad calamity above I could also have said:

(39)   The thief might have left a little potato salad for our breakfast.

There is obviously a wide-scope reading of the description "the thief" with respect to the modal "might." However, this reading need not correspond to a communication of an object-dependent proposition about some individual. Even with the wide-scope reading, (39) can be used to express a general proposition about whoever stole the potato salad.

So merely establishing when different scopes are available is not enough to establish what the basic propositional contribution of descriptions are. Indeed, I want my proposal to remain neutral on exactly this point. Whatever account of the semantics and pragmatics of descriptions we give, it must explain both the referential and attributive uses of descriptions. The current standard theory within philosophy takes descriptions to be semantically encoded to express general propositions and explains the referential uses by appeal to pragmatics.[33] I have nothing to say about the merits of this proposal. What I will argue for in the remainder of this paper is that, contra the philosophical orthodoxy on this question, facts about scope give us no reason to treat proper names any differently from definite descriptions.

5   Proper Names and the Modal Argument

An extremely influential argument in the philosophy of language, Kripke's modal argument, purports to show that proper names are not semantically equivalent to definite descriptions.[34] Here is one version of the argument:

1. Definite descriptions exhibit narrow-scope readings with respect to modal operators.

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[33]Kripke, "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference; Neale, *Descriptions*.

[34]Three pieces that seem to understand the argument this way are Linsky *Oblique Contexts*, ch. 7; Stanley "Names and Rigid Designation"; Soames, *Beyond Rigidity*, ch. 2.

2. Proper names do not exhibit narrow-scope readings with respect to modal opera-
    tors.

3. The meaning of a proper name cannot be the same as that of a definite description.

The argument depends upon the sort of observations I made in the introduction to this
paper. Consider, for instance, (2), repeated here:

(2)   Mary-Sue could have been married to Grover Cleveland.

The modal argument begins by suggesting that on the hypothesis that "Grover Cleve-
land" is really semantically equivalent to some description, "the F," one should expect to
find two possible readings of (2), corresponding to whether the description, "the F," gets
its scope under the modal (finding the satisfier of the description within each possible
situation) or outside the modal (picking out its actual satisfier, i.e. Grover Cleveland).
However (2) does not seem to exhibit different readings of this sort. So, the argument
concludes, "Grover Cleveland" cannot be equivalent to "the F."

   Many have noted that the argument only shows that proper names are not semanti-
cally equivalent to those descriptions whose descriptive content allows them to pick out
different objects in different possible situations. In other words, the argument shows
that proper names are not equivalent to those descriptions whose descriptive content is
actually capable of being satisfied by different individuals in different situations. Some
descriptions do not have this property. These include descriptions whose descriptive
content contains some indexical reference to the actual world. No matter what their
scope is, such descriptions always pick out the same individual (they are so-called *rigid-
ified descriptions*). In light of this qualification, we can view the modal argument as
purporting to establish that, if proper names are semantically equivalent to any definite
descriptions, they are semantically equivalent to rigidified descriptions like "the actual
mayor."[35]

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[35]Discussion of rigidified descriptions include Stanley, "Names and Rigid Designation"; Soames, *Be-
yond Rigidity*; and Michael Nelson, "Descriptivism Defended," *Noûs*, 36 (2002): 408–435.

The first premise in my presentation of the modal argument above states that definite descriptions exhibit narrow-scope readings with respect to modal operators. In this paper, however, I have presented and explained a significant qualification to this claim. I have shown that only *role-type* descriptions can have narrow scope with respect to a modal operator. Thus, we need to revise our assessment of the modal argument in light of this qualification.[36]

In fact, once we recognize that definite descriptions do not *always* exhibit scope ambiguities with respect to modal operators, the modal argument loses much of its

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[36]Kripke explicitly acknowledges the degree to which his argument depends on descriptions acting Russellian, and hence being able to get narrow scope (Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, p. 6, fn 8). Bart Geurts ["Good News about the Description Theory of Names," *Journal of Semantics*, 14 (1997): 319–348] also picks up on this issue, arguing that names are like certain descriptions which always take wide scope (though he does not offer an account of *why* these descriptions take wide scope):

> The presuppositions triggered by names seem to have a decidedly stronger tendency to 'take wide scope' than some others. In this respect, too, they are on a par with other descriptively attenuate 'incomplete', definites like 'the door' or anaphoric pronouns like 'it'.

Likewise, Dummett thinks that the modal argument lacks force because only some descriptions can have narrow scope within a modal operator. However, for some reason, he thinks the only descriptions that can take narrow scope are ones that appear after the copula:

> We are now in a position to understand the grain of truth in Kripke's doctrine of proper names as rigid designators. For modal contexts in general, there is no relevant difference between proper names and definite descriptions: but the matter stands otherwise when the name of the descriptions is preceded by the verb 'to be' or 'to become'. [Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), p. 131.]

This is wrong, however, as the following minimal pair shows:

(1)   John might have made friends with the president.

(2)   John might have made friends with Grover Cleveland.

Only in the case of the first sentence can one detect a scope ambiguity. So definite descriptions do not *only* differ from proper names after the copula.

force against descriptivist accounts of names. If one assumes that descriptions always exhibit scope ambiguities, then *one* instance of a sentence containing a proper name and a modal operator that does not show a scope ambiguity will serve to demonstrate that names cannot be descriptions (except perhaps rigidified descriptions). But, once we have recognized that descriptions do not generally show scope ambiguities, we can no longer reason in this way. Many definite descriptions, such as "the man in the corner" and "the person I saw yesterday," have restrictions on what scope they can get with respect to modal operators. These descriptions belong to the large class of descriptions that are particularized in most contexts and, thus, do not exhibit narrow-scope readings in these contexts. The modal argument fails to show that proper names are not equivalent to *these* sorts of descriptions.

It's worth noting that this is a significantly larger qualification than the one in the previous section about rigidified descriptions. Descriptions like "the man in the corner" are not rigidified descriptions since they have a predicative content which different individuals can satisfy in different situations. So, the class of definite descriptions that are generally particularized includes descriptions which are not rigidified. In addition, while it's extremely hard to find real English expressions that act as rigidified descriptions ("the actual mayor" certainly doesn't), it's extremely easy to find English expressions that are usually particularized descriptions.

Another way of putting my basic point is to say that the modal argument still leaves open the possibility that names are particularized descriptions. Of course, whether a description is particularized or role-type depends upon the relationship between the common ground and the predicative content of the description. So, a name is unlikely *always* to be a particularized description, but a name might be equivalent to a definite description that has a descriptive content which makes it particularized in most contexts. This hypothesis would explain the resistance names show to taking narrow scope in most instances.

In the remainder of the paper I examine one particular descriptivist conception of names to see whether, according to this conception, names can be construed as

particularized descriptions. I will also look at contexts in which, according to this descriptivist proposal, names do *not* act as particularized descriptions. By looking at these contexts we can assess whether, as the descriptivist should predict, names can sometimes get narrow scope with respect to modal operators. I will argue that—contrary to the philosophical orthodoxy—the descriptivist view does extremely well at predicting the potential scope of proper names with respect to modal operators.

6   Names as Metalinguistic Descriptions

The view that names are semantically equivalent to definite descriptions is often described as the view that names are *disguised* descriptions, since unlike real definite descriptions names do not openly show their descriptive content. This leads to the question of what the descriptive content of a name is. Here I will sketch one answer to this question, but I will not systematically consider alternatives.

One of the most plausible instantiations of the view that names are descriptions treats names as "metalinguistic" descriptions.[37] On this account, the meaning of a name N is roughly captured by the description "the bearer of N." We must distinguish this account of the semantics of proper names from the truism that a name N refers to whoever is referred to by N. The view that names are metalinguistic descriptions, unlike this truism, is neither trivial nor circular. We have a social practice of naming, under which one cannot bear a name just in virtue of some person using it to refer to you. So the facts about name-bearing are not mere trivial metalinguistic ones, like the

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[37]Such views have a long tradition. Williams Kneale ["Modality De Dicto and De Re." in E. Nagel, P. Suppes, and A. Tarksi, eds., *Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science. Proceedings of the 1960 International Congress* (Stanford University Press, 1962)] explicitly advocates a metalinguistic view and Burge ["Reference and Proper Names," *Journal of Philosophy*, LXX (1973): 425–439] comes close to this view, though he treats names as predicates. See also Geurts, "Good News about the Description Theory of Names"; Jerrold Katz, "The End of Millianism," *Journal of Philosophy*, XCVIII (2001): 137–166; and Kent Bach, "Giorgione was So-Called Because of his Name," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 16 (2002): 73–103.

fact that "jump" means jump. In fact, the metalinguistic view of names makes a very strong claim: that each proper name has the same meaning as some particular definite description.

Definite descriptions trigger presuppositions; so, if proper names are equivalent to certain definite descriptions they will also trigger presuppositions. Earlier, I suggested that definite descriptions trigger the presupposition that there is a uniquely salient individual satisfying the descriptive content. So, if a name N were equivalent to the description "the bearer of N," then a use of N would trigger the presupposition that there is a uniquely salient person bearing N. It seems plausible that names carry this presupposition. For when we use a proper name usually we presuppose that there is a most salient person bearing the name. Without this presupposition we could not expect our audience to understand to whom we meant to refer.

Kripke in *Naming and Necessity* makes other powerful arguments, besides the modal argument, against the view that names are disguised descriptions. His strongest argument, to my mind, is one about speaker knowledge. Here is a version of this argument: If the name "Plato" were synonymous with the description "the author of *The Republic*" then one would think that competent users of the name would have to know—at least implicitly—that Plato is the author of *The Republic*. However, it absurd to suppose that it is a condition on semantic competence with the term "Plato" that one know that "Plato" wrote *The Republic*.

I do not think the metalinguistic view succumbs to this argument about speaker knowledge. The knowledge that a person referred to by a name bears that name may well be part of every competent speaker's grasp of the meaning of the name. The only objection to this that I can see is the claim that children are able to use proper names without having sufficient conceptual resources to grasp descriptions like "the bearer of N." There are a few things to be said about this. First, the conceptual capacities of very young children may be extremely sophisticated, so that the empirical claim may simply be false: children might, from their first uses of proper names, be in a position

to grasp (in some sense) the descriptions associated with names.[38] Second, even if children can use proper names without grasping the descriptions associated with them, this does not mean that the adult use of proper names is not descriptive in the way I have suggested.[39] Third, it may be that children's use of proper names is in some way *parasitic* on adult usage or *deferential* to it, so that if adults did not use names as metalinguistic descriptions children would not be able to use them to refer people at all. These considerations show that the knowledge argument may not be successful against the metalinguistic view.[40]

7   Names as Descriptions under Modals

Now that we have a reasonable account of the descriptive content of proper names in hand we can see whether it predicts that names are usually particularized descriptions. Recall that particularized descriptions are ones whose descriptive content is *not* commonly known to be uniquely satisfied by different individuals across a range of relevant possible circumstances. It seems to me that in most contexts metalinguistic descriptions must be particularized. For instance, it would require a very odd context to make it plausible that over an entire range of different possibilities there would always be a uniquely salient "Samuel" available, but without this being the same person in each situation. In many possible situations there is at least one person called "Samuel", but it is hard to see why there would always be one most salient such person.

    In other words, metalinguistic descriptions *are* particularized definite descriptions in

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[38]Paul Bloom [*How Children Learn the Meaning of Words* (Cambridge: MIT, 2001)] discusses what conceptual capacities children might need to learn the meaning of names and other words.

[39]Of course many who hold a descriptive account of names will not be happy with this response because they do not think that it is possible for there to be referring devices without descriptive content. They may, however, think that children associate *different* descriptions with names from those which adult users associate with them.

[40]See the literature cited in footnote 37 for discussion of how the metalinguistic view of names might avoid other challenges from Kripke and elsewhere.

most contexts, since for most relevant classes of possible situations one cannot suppose there will be a different uniquely salient person satisfying the descriptive content in each situation. Supporting this view is the fact that it is quite hard to get descriptions of the form "the man bearing the name N" to have narrow scope under metaphysical modals. Consider this sentence:

(40)   The president might not have been the man called "Havelock."

It is very hard to read "the president" in (40) as a wide-scope description while reading "the man called 'Havelock'" as a narrow-scope description—in other words it is hard to read the sentence as saying that the actual man who is now the current president might have had a different name. So, as we should expect given the conclusions I have reached, metalinguistic descriptions are extremely resistant to getting narrow scope.

Of course, in some contexts even metalinguistic descriptions will count as role-type descriptions. And in such cases, metalinguistic descriptions will be able to receive narrow-scope interpretations. Let us imagine a situation in which it is part of the common ground that there is always one, but not always the same, person bearing a particular name across different situations. Consider the name "M"—the name of the head of the British secret service in *James Bond*. "M" looks like a proper name, but if it is a proper name it is one which *can* get narrow scope with respect to modal operators:

(41)   John might have become M.

The names of superheros also exhibit this behavior. Consider Batman and Superman. In different circumstances different individuals may bear the superhero-title.[41] Given this fact, it would be appropriate to talk about who *might* have been Superman or Batman. If proper names were just tags attached to particular individuals this behavior would be unexpected: We would not expect that the mere presentation of various relevant counterfactual situations across which different individuals lay claim to the same name would allow names to have narrow scope under modal operators. So names such as "M"

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[41]Apparently there is a series of comic books set in the future in which different individuals are Batman, Superman, etc.

and "Superman", unless they are somehow special, or differ in their semantic status from other proper names, provide support for the idea that names are semantically equivalent to definite descriptions, and, thus, in appropriate circumstances, can act as role-type descriptions.[42]

The metalinguistic view has many further consequences, however, and we need to see whether they are also supported by our linguistic intuitions about how proper names work. For instance, the view entails that names should *always* show the same potential scope as the definite descriptions that paraphrase them. Many have contested this point. The following examples, discussed by Barbara Abbott,[43] are supposed to show that names cannot be synonymous with metalinguistic descriptions:

(42)   Aristotle might not have been Aristotle.

(43)   Aristotle might not have been the man named "Aristotle."

The usual claim is that (42) has no true reading whereas (43) has a true reading.

It is worth pointing out, first of all, that neither sentence *easily* gets a sensible reading as a metaphysical modal assertion.[44] This is evident from the fact that neither (42) nor

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[42]Some, such as Soames. in*Beyond Rigidity*, argue that names like these are semantically distinct from other proper names.

[43]"Definiteness and Proper Names: Some Bad News for the Description Theory," *Journal of Semantics*, 19 (2001): 191–201

[44]Perhaps Abbott's argument is about epistemic modality rather than metaphysical modality. In this case, I think the purported difference between (42) and (43) invites a pragmatic explanation. This is because, proper names, generally, *can* get non-rigid narrow-scope readings within epistemic modals. A pragmatic explanation of the difference between (42) and (43) could rely on the observation that if a definite noun phrase is repeated twice with the same intonation it is generally taken to have the same referent. And indeed if we raise the intonation on the second "Aristotle" from (43) we get a true reading:

(1)   Aristotle might not have been ↑ARISTotle.

Critics of the descriptivist view would argue that this second use is special and somehow non-literal. However, since what is being debated is whether or not names are descriptions, simply labeling all descriptive uses as non-literal is question-begging. In fact, emphasizing a word does not always make

(43) express the same thing as (44) nor is as obviously true:

(44)   Aristotle might not have been named "Aristotle."

This fact, of course, just follows from the earlier observation that particularized descriptions like "the man named Aristotle" in (43) do not have narrow-scope readings under metaphysical modals. A sentence like (43) is not assertible just by virtue of there being a metaphysically possible world where Aristotle is not named "Aristotle." Rather getting the narrow-scope reading of the description in (43) requires the common ground to include an entire range of relevant possible situations in which the descriptive content is satisfied by different individuals.

In certain contexts, a description such as "the man named 'Aristotle'" will be a role-type one. For instance, imagine it is commonly known that Greek law ensures that one and only one person is called "Aristotle" at a single moment of time. In this case there may be different relevant possible situations in which different people are uniquely called "Aristotle" and so the description "the man named 'Aristotle'" acts as a role-type one. Then, we might have an interest in who would have been called "Aristotle" if the actual person called "Aristotle" had not been born. Consider this sentence:

(45)   The person bearing the name "Aristotle" could have been a sailor.

In these circumstances, it seems like it is quite easy to give the description a narrow-scope interpretation.

The crucial test for the metalinguistic descriptivist view is whether proper names

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the use non-literal. One might rather think emphasis is meant to show that the two uses of the name are not meant to be taken as co-referential. A similar phenomenon occurs with pronouns in these examples.

(2)   He went to the gym, and ↑HE went to the bathroom.

(3)   He went to the gym, and he went to the bathroom.

So rising intonation can indicate that a word is being used for a different purpose, but not that the use is somehow non-literal or metalinguistic. Sorting out these issues would require more serious work on focus and intonation.

also allow narrow scope in such circumstances. It is unclear what one should say about the sentence containing two proper names, (42), repeated below, when uttered in a context in which a Greek law of this sort is commonly known to be in effect.

(42)   Aristotle might not have been Aristotle.

I think it is perhaps less good than the sentence yielded by replacing the proper names with two definite descriptions:

(46)   The man called "Aristotle" might not have been the man called "Aristotle."

But the difference between the felicity of these two sentences is *very* subtle, and both of these sentences are rather unnatural. A better example of a potential narrow-scope use of a proper name is a variation on (45):

(47)   Aristotle could have been a sailor.

If there is a Greek law stipulating that there is always one and only one Aristotle at any given time, then (47) seems like it has a reading on which the name gets narrow scope. I am not sure whether, with the narrow-scope reading, (47) is less natural than (45) or not. In general, I am not sure where the weight of intuitions lies in these cases.[45] However, I do not think the intuitions are weighty enough to form the basis of a serious argument against the view that names are semantically equivalent to metalinguistic definite descriptions.

We should not despair over the semantics of proper names just because our judgments of critical cases are hazy. The messiness of the data is not an obstacle to understanding proper names; it is just another piece of data in its own right. The question of whether proper names are particularized descriptions might not have a determinate answer. The right hypothesis may be that names are very similar to metalinguistic descriptions, but

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[45]One has to put aside the question-begging temptation—common in discussions of the modal argument—to label any narrow-scope use of a proper name as somehow special and, hence, irrelevant. The important thing to note in this context is that the narrow-scope uses of some definite descriptions, the ones which are usually particularized such as that in (45), *also* sound slightly odd.

not *exactly* the same. That is, we may have a conventionally encoded *bias* towards particularized readings of the descriptive content that names bring with them.

What is important to see is that once we restrict our attention to the relevant situations—the cases where names should, on the descriptivist view, get narrow scope—the difference between names and descriptions becomes extremely subtle. Altogether the metalinguistic view of proper names does well at predicting what scope proper names will get under modal operators. If anything, it does better than standard non-descriptivist views which do not have many resources for explaining the fact that names sometimes *do* exhibit narrow scope under modal operators.

I certainly do not intend this as a serious defense of the metalinguistic view of proper names. While the view has its attractions, I am not inclined to think it is correct—if only for the reason that it is hard to explain why, out of the whole space of possible descriptive contents that names might have, names happen to have the metalinguistic content.[46] My main point here is just that considerations of scope do not force us to treat proper names as being semantically distinct from definite descriptions.

8   Conclusion

I have argued here that definite descriptions and proper names can be treated as expressions designed to pick out entities that satisfy certain presuppositions. These presuppositions give rise to different scoping potential in different contexts under modal operators and adverbs of quantification. I think this position should be the default one, since it respects the basic intuition that singular terms including both descriptions and names share a deep semantic commonality. Since this view also provides a better analysis of the interaction of modals with definite descriptions and proper names, it has much to recommend it.

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[46]I am inclined to think linguistic usage (in speech or in the head) does not determinately fix the descriptive content of names. Thus, there is no fact of the matter about what the descriptive content of names is.

I hope my arguments here can help clarify the philosophical discussion of singular terms. Much of what interests philosophers in this area is the (apparent) capacity of singular terms to directly refer to objects and individuals. Theorists have tended to focus on the semantics of proper names in their discussions of such direct reference. However, if the semantics of names does not differ substantially from that of descriptions then direct reference is more likely to be an aspect of language *use* rather than a general semantic property of a category of expressions.[47,48]

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[47]Of course, direct reference theorists also argue that other terms such as demonstratives and indexicals are directly referential. I would hope the line of argument developed here might be expanded to encompass indexicals and demonstratives also.

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