

PREDICATES, PREDICABLES AND NAMES

GEORGE ENGLEBRETSEN
Bishop's University

Recently Jennifer Hornsby, in her defense of Tyler Burge,¹ has reraised the issue of the logical role of proper names. Burge's thesis² (that proper names are predicates) is meant to account for the fact that proper names occur in forms normally exhibited by predicates (*viz.* in the plural, with articles, or quantified). Examples are

1. Smiths out-numbered Seymores.
2. A Smith lives on our street.
3. All Smiths are boring.

For the most part Burge's thesis is well-argued by him and defended by Hornsby. Yet it's not quite the right story — either of predicates or proper names.

Suppose you are told that John is a winner. You immediately want to know: the winner of what? People are not just winners. Or losers. A person may win some races or contests and lose others. The phrase 'x is a winner' must always be replaceable by 'x is a winner of y', where 'y' refers to some race or contest or the like. Winning, and losing, is context-bound. So is being a predicate.

In the same way that being a winner is not what any person is *simpliciter*, being a predicate is not what any term is *simpliciter*. Being a winner is a status which a person may enjoy from time to time in appropriate contexts. Being a predicate is a status held by a term from time to time in an appropriate

¹ "Proper Names: a Defense of Burge", *Philosophical Studies*, 30 (1976).

² "Reference and Proper Names", *Journal of Philosophy*, 70 (1973).

sentence. In the sentence 'the astronauts are men' the term 'men' is a predicate. It is the *predicate* of the given sentence. In the list 'white', 'happy', 'Greek', 'lost', 'men', 'dogs' the term 'men' is not a predicate. Nor are any of the other terms on that list. Being a predicate is something a term does in a sentence. Outside of any sentence a term like 'men' cannot be viewed as a predicate. But it is the sort of term that *could be a predicate*. It plays that role, or enjoys that status, or is used that way, in 'the astronauts are men'. A word like 'the' or 'all' or 'and' could not be a predicate. A term that could be the predicate of a sentence might be called a *predicable*. All predicates are predicables. The converse, obviously, does not hold.

Just as there are terms which might be found in the predicate position of a sentence, there are terms which might be found in the subject position of a sentence. In the sentence 'dogs are canine' the term 'dogs' is the subject. It is the *subject* of the given sentence. But in the list given above it is not a subject. Nor are any of the other terms on that list.

There are terms which could be the subject of one sentence and the predicate of another. Thus 'men' is the predicate of 'the astronauts are men' but the subject of 'men are mortal'. In Aristotle's concept of the syllogistic only terms which could be *either* subjects *or* predicates could be the terms of a syllogism, since this would be required for the middle term of a first figure syllogism, the major term of a second figure syllogism, and the minor term of a third figure syllogism.

Modern first order predicate calculus reflects a different set of prejudices concerning predicates. The view now³ is that all the general terms of a sentence are to be read, logically, as predicates. In the traditional, Aristotelian theory, any sentence has one subject and one predicate. In the modern theory any sentence has as many predicates as it has general terms. The thesis that general terms are predicates is the other side of a coin marked: singular terms are subjects. Consider the

³ See W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), chapter five.

sentence 'fish swim'. The traditional theory holds that this sentence has as its predicate the general term 'swim' and as its subject the general term 'fish'. The modern theory holds that this sentence has two general terms and thus two predicates. Furthermore, it holds that there is a one-one correspondance between predicates and atomic sentences. So our sentence is really (logically) a function of two or more primitive sentences — one whose predicate is 'swim', the other whose predicate is 'fish'. Since all subjects must be singular, and no singular terms occur here, proto-singulars *viz.* singular pronouns) must be introduced. The two primitive sentences, then, are 'it is a fish' and 'it swims'. Notice that now in both cases the general terms are indeed predicates.

The gap between the traditional theory of logical syntax and the modern theory is great. Nevertheless, the mere hint of it given above shows that the key concept of predicate is quite unique relative to each. Hornsby and Burge, like all moderns, take a predicate to be any general term. When Burge says that proper names are predicates he means that they are (can be used as) general terms. The distinction between a term and its role in a sentence, *e.g.* between a predicable and a predicate, is ignored throughout. Look again, now, at sentences 1, 2 and 3. It is claimed that in each case a proper name is being used as a predicate. Not so. Treating a term, even a proper name, as if it were general is one thing. Using it as a predicate is quite another.

The twin prejudices that predicates must be general and subjects must be abandoned. Any term, whether singular or general can be either a subject of a sentence or a predicate of a sentence. Most importantly, we actually *see* general terms used as subjects and singular terms (including proper names) used as predicates. The sentences 'men are mortal', 'all dogs bark', 'any woman can', 'Mondays are a drag', and 'some people love to work' all have general terms as subjects. The sentences 'Tully was Cicero', 'my brother is John', 'Carter is the new leader of the Democratic Party', 'the family next door

are the Smiths', and 'the mind is the brain' all have singular terms as predicates.

Needless to say, much more can and should be said here, especially about the predication of singular terms.⁴ However, what, at least, has been shown is that while Burge and Hornsby have defended the thesis that proper names can be used as general terms, they have come nowhere near the stronger and more important thesis that proper names are predicables.

⁴ Much has already been said in recent years. See: F. Sommers, "Do We Need Identity?" *Journal of Philosophy*, 64 (1969); "On a Fregean Dogma", in I. Lakatos, *Problems in the Philosophy of Mathematics* (Amsterdam, 1967); "The Calculus of Terms". *Mind*, 79 (1970); "Logical Syntax in Natural Language", in A. MacKay and D. Merrill, *Issues in the Philosophy of Language* (Oberlin, 1976); A. Noah, *Singular Terms and Predication*, doctoral thesis (Brandeis University, 1973); and M. Lockwood, "On Predicating Proper Names", *Philosophical Review*, 84 (1975); G. Englebretsen, "A Note on Predication", *Dialogue*, 19 (1980); and G. Englebretsen, "Do We Need Relative Identity?" *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, forthcoming.