

# Can a Proper Name Be Defined?

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The concept of *proper name* is one of the main topics discussed in the philosophy of language. Philosophers of language have tried to answer numerous philosophical questions on proper names. Let us look, for example, at some of these questions: How does a proper name refer to its referent, if it has one? Is the referent of a proper name – the object to which it refers – the same in all conceivable possible worlds? What is the difference between a proper name and a definite description?<sup>[1]</sup> In our opinion, among such questions, the philosophical question that should be answered first in terms of logical sequence is the following: Is it possible to give a definition to a proper name? For example, as we will explain later, when we want to disclose the content of a concept, we first give a definition to it. Otherwise, any concept whose content has not been disclosed will remain unknown to us. Therefore, before answering the other philosophical questions about a proper name, it should be clarified whether it is possible to give a definition to *any* proper name. The next corresponding questions may come into focus only after that.

The purpose of our question is not to determine whether it is possible to define the term “proper name” used in grammar books. Obviously, as a grammatical category, the concept of a proper name can be defined, and in what follows we will become acquainted with that definition. Nevertheless, the purpose of the paper is to determine whether it is possible to give a definition to proper names, such as “Aybeniz,” “Baku,” “The Caspian Sea,” etc. In this paper, using the argument considered by Ibn Sina in his book *Al-Ilahiyyat* as an example, I will try to show that it is not possible to give a definition to *any* proper name.

## 1. What is a proper name?

As we know from grammar books, proper names refer to single objects. They are used to distinguish one person or object from others. Human names (or surnames, nicknames, pseudonyms), names of mountains, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, springs, streams, names of books, newspapers, magazines, names of individual animals and objects are proper names.<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, a proper name always refers to a certain concrete object and never applies to anything other than that object. For example, "Aybeniz" is a proper name because it refers to a certain person called by this name and does not apply to anyone else; "Baku" is a proper name because it refers to a certain concrete place and does not apply to any other place; "The Caspian Sea" is a proper name because it refers to a certain concrete sea and does not apply to any other sea, etc.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. What is a definition?

Before we state the argument in favor of our claim, let us first consider the definition of a definition, or what we do when we define something. When we want to disclose the content of any concept, we first familiarize ourselves with its definition. A definition is a logical tool that makes an unknown concept known. In logic, "definition" is defined as follows: A *definition* determines the meaning or conceptual content of a linguistic expression (i.e. word, phrase and sentence). Definitions consist of two elements: the defining concept (*definiens*) and the defined concept (*definiendum*).<sup>[4]</sup> We often give definitions to words, sometimes to phrases, and rarely to sentences. According to the definition of "definition," a definition sometimes clarifies the meaning of a linguistic expression, and sometimes its conceptual content. The second is considered to be clearer and more disclosed than the first. For example, when we want to define the word "barometer," we can define it as "a device that measures pressure." In this example, *barometer* is regarded as *definiendum*, and *a device that measures pressure* as *definiens*. This definition clarifies the meaning of the word "barometer."

Nevertheless, the definition in question remains obscure and undisclosed to us. This is because someone can ask: What does “a device that measures pressure” mean? However, the additional definition “a barometer is a scientific instrument used to measure air pressure,” clarifies the conceptual content of the word “barometer.”

Let us consider another example. We can define “philosophy” as “love of wisdom.” However, this expression does not clarify the meaning of the word “philosophy”; and it does not sufficiently disclose the concept that the word in question purports to express. But if we define this word, for example, as “the discipline that studies the fundamental questions of reality, knowledge and value by an a priori method,” this will better clarify the conceptual content of the word “philosophy.” When we define words in philosophical discussions, we usually clarify their conceptual content.

### **3. An argument in favor of our claim**

Now that we have considered the definition of “definition,” we can proceed to the demonstration of our claim. In order to demonstrate the above-mentioned claim that it is not possible to give a definition to any proper name, we will draw on Ibn Sina’s argument used in his book *Al-Ilahiyyat*.<sup>[5]</sup> The logical strategy of this argument is as follows: It assumes the opposite of the proposition we are trying to demonstrate, that is, the opposite of the proposition that a proper name does not have a definition. In other words, it assumes that a proper name has a definition. Then it shows that the latter assumption leads to a contradiction. Therefore, we will reject the assumption that a proper name has a definition. Thus, it will become clear that the opposite of the assumption we are trying to demonstrate is not true.

If one does not accept the assumption that proper names do not have definitions, then they must accept the opposite of this assumption, that is, the assumption that proper names have

definitions. Based on this hypothesis, we construct our argument as follows:

### 3.1. The argument

1. A proper name has a definition (an assumption).
2. Definitions consist of descriptions (a logical rule).
3. A description can apply to more than one object (a definition).
4. Each description involved in the definition of a proper name can apply to more than one object (according to Premise 2 and Premise 3).
5. A proper name can apply to only one object (a definition).
6. The conjunction of Premise 4 and Premise 5 yields a contradiction.
7. Hence, there is no definition of a proper name (according to Premises 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6).

### 3.2. The assessment of the argument

Let us consider the premises of the argument step by step. In Premise 1, we assume the opposite of the proposition that we try to demonstrate – that is, the proposition that a proper name has a definition. Later, we will show that such an assumption leads to a contradiction<sup>[6]</sup> and we will reject this initial assumption, because, according to the law of non-contradiction, both of the propositions – that there is a definition of a proper name and that there is no definition of a proper name – cannot be true; either the proposition that a proper name has a definition, or the proposition that a proper name does not have a definition is true. The first proposition, as we shall see below, cannot be regarded as true, because it leads to a contradiction; thus, the second proposition – that there is no definition of a proper name –

should be regarded as true.

Premise 2 is a logical rule regarding definition: a definition is expressed by means of descriptions. When we define something, we do not refer to that thing with demonstrative pronouns such as “this” or “that,” but rather, we use concepts that describe it to us in order to disclose the content of the concept which applies to that thing. For example, when we want to define the word “barometer,” we do not point to it by saying “this is a barometer” or “that is a barometer” because this would be an ostensive naming; when we point to the object in front of us and say “this is a barometer,” we dub it “barometer.” When we want to define “barometer,” we appeal to the concepts that describe it to us – atmosphere, pressure, measure, device. To put it more clearly, we say: “A device that measures atmospheric pressure is called a *barometer*.”

Premise 3 is about the definition of a description: A name that can apply to more than one object is called a *description*. To better understand what a description is, it is worth comparing it with the concepts of *universal* and *particular* in logic. A universal concept is a concept that can apply to more than one object.<sup>[7]</sup> For example, the concept of a *human* is a universal concept because it applies to many different objects: to Ilgar, Samir, Gulnar, Sabina, etc. The concepts of a *book*, *water*, *iron*, *stone*, etc. are also of the same kind, because each of these concepts apply to numerous objects. A particular concept, however, is a concept that can apply to only one object.<sup>[8]</sup> For example, as a particular concept, *Ilgar* applies only to a concrete person called by the corresponding name. The concepts of *Baku*, *The Caspian Sea*, *Neftchi*, *Facebook*, etc. are also of the same kind because each of them applies to only one object. In other words, in contrast to universal concepts, particular concepts apply to unique and individual entities. Thus, it is clear that descriptions express universal concepts.<sup>[9]</sup>

Premise 4 follows from Premise 2 and Premise 3; for if a definition consists of descriptions and the description can apply to more than one object, then every description involved in the definition of a proper name will also apply to more than one object; even if a single name is formed from several descriptions, it can still apply to more than one object. In other words, if, in a definition, we combine one universal concept with another one, it will still yield a universal concept; and no matter how many universal concepts we add, the result will not change, that is, the resulting concept will always be universal; it can never be a particular concept. For example, *water* is a universal concept, and if we combine a universal concept called "pureness" with it and say "pure water," the resulting new concept – *pure water* – will still be a universal concept. If we add a third universal concept called "sweetness" to the concept of *pure water* and say "sweet pure water," the resulting new concept – *sweet pure water* – will still be a universal concept. Thus, regardless of how many universal concepts are combined together, a particular concept will never be yielded.

Now let us consider Ibn Sina's own example. As we know from the history of philosophy, "Socrates" is the name of a Greek philosopher who lived in Athens between 470-399 BC. Therefore, "Socrates" is a proper name. If we want to give a definition to "Socrates," we can do it in the following ways:

1. Socrates is a philosopher.
2. Socrates is a pious philosopher.
3. Socrates is a pious philosopher who was unjustly sentenced to death.
4. Socrates is the son of a person called X.
5. Socrates is a person who was killed in such and such a city on such and such day, etc.

Although each of these *definiens* attempts to describe Socrates more precisely, none of them applies to only one object; on the contrary, they can apply to more than one object because the words used in the definitions – “philosopher,” “pious philosopher,” “a pious philosopher who was unjustly sentenced to death,” “a person who was killed in such and such a city on such and such a day” – are descriptions; that is, they express a universal concept, which can apply to various objects. For example, there are other persons besides Socrates to whom the concept of *philosopher* applies. The other concepts listed above are similar. The concept of *the son of a person called X* mentioned in the fourth definition is slightly different from the other concepts. For if by “a person called X” we mean Socrates’s father Sophroniscus, then “Sophroniscus,” as a proper name, should also be defined. Yet a definition, as already noted, consists of descriptions, which express universal concepts that can apply to more than one object. Hence, as a description, “the son of a person called X” can also apply to more than one object.

Premise 5 touches upon the definition of a proper name. As we mentioned, a proper name is a name that can refer to only one object. To put it another way, a proper name expresses a particular concept; for example, “Socrates,” as a proper name, refers only to the concrete person called by this name, and it does not refer to anyone other than that person.

Premise 6 shows that the conjunction of Premise 4 and Premise 5 leads to a contradiction. That is, the assumption that each description involved in the definition of a proper name can refer to more than one object *and* a proper name can refer to only one object is contradictory<sup>[10]</sup> because if, based on the first and second conditions of the definition of “definition,” we take into account that the extension of *definiendum* and that of *definiens* are the same, it turns out that, on the one hand, *definiendum* – or the proper name that expresses it – applies to only one object, and on the other hand, *definiens*

applies to more than one object, because if each unit of the definition is descriptive, then their combination will also be descriptive. Thus, whereas *definiendum* and *definiens* should be applied to the same thing, we get the contradictory conclusion that a proper name applies both to only one object and several objects at the same time. To put this contradiction more clearly, a proper name can refer to only one object and not only one object at the same time.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Thus, according to Premises 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, it becomes clear that it is impossible to define proper names such as "Aybeniz," "Baku," "The Caspian Sea," etc. A proper name expresses a concrete concept that cannot be defined, while giving a definition to it leads to a contradiction.

#### **Notes and References:**

[1] In addition to proper names, each language also has descriptions that denote a certain concrete object. In other words, there are also a number of descriptions that have the characteristics of proper names. For example, the descriptions such as "the author of *The Treasury of Mysteries*," "the founder of *SpaceX*," "the capital of Azerbaijan," "the current president of USA," "the smallest prime number," etc. refer to a certain concrete object; that is, the first description refers to Nizami Ganjavi, the second to Elon Musk, the third to Baku, the fourth to Joe Biden, and the fifth to the number 2. Such descriptions are called *definite descriptions*.

[2] Qəzənfər, K. (2010): *Müasir Azərbaycan dili – Morfologiya*, Bakı: Elm və Təhsil, p. 44.

[3] As we know, there are different kinds of definitions. When we say that it is impossible to define a proper name, we mean all kinds of definitions, except ostensive ones.



[4] In a definition, the defining concept (*definiens*) and the defined one (*definiendum*) are usually considered together. But sometimes, by “definition”, we mean only the defining concept.

[5] Ibn Sina (2015): *Al-Ilahiyat*, Article V, Chapter VIII, Iran: Bustane-ketab, p. 248.

[6] The law of non-contradiction is one of the four basic laws of human thought. The ontological reading of the law of non-contradiction is as follows: Nothing can both be and not be at the same time: everything either exists or does not exist. The logical/epistemological reading of this law is as follows: A thought (or a meaningful sentence) cannot be both true and false at the same time: it is either true or false.

[7] To put it more precisely, a universal concept is a concept that it is *not impossible* to apply it to more than one object.

[8] To put it more precisely, a particular concept is a concept that it is *impossible* to apply it to more than one object.

[9] It is also clear from the given explanations that the adjective, which is regarded as one of the main parts of speech in grammar, consists of descriptive words (“white,” “big,” “hot,” “fair,” “tolerant,” etc.) as well. Different objects or persons can be denoted by these adjectives: a white door, a white book, a white chair, a white bag, a hot tea, a hot food, a hot iron, etc.

[10] As stated in logic, the definition should be neither too exclusive nor too inclusive. The definition should not be too exclusive; that is, *definiens* should not be so narrow as not to cover all individual applications of *definiendum*. For example, if we define the word “bachelor” as “an unmarried Azerbaijani man,” this definition will not cover all individuals who the given concept applies to, because unmarried Chinese, African, Pakistani, etc. men are also

regarded as bachelors. Therefore, the word "Azerbaijani" should be omitted from the definition. The definition should not be too inclusive; that is, *definiens* should not be so broad as to include both the individual applications of *definiendum* and the individual applications of the undefined concept. For example, if we define the word "bachelor" as "an unmarried man," then this definition will also apply to a four-year-old child, while a child of this age is not regarded as bachelor. Therefore, in order for it not to apply to unrelated individuals, the word "adult" should be added to the definition. (Cf. Munson. R, Black. A (2012): *The elements of reasoning*, USA: Wadsworth, pp. 153-154)

The fact that the definition should be neither too exclusive nor too inclusive means that the extension of *definiendum* and that of *definiens* should be the same; that is, *definiens* should apply only to those which *definiendum* applies to: *definiendum* = *definiens*. To put it another way, if a definition discloses the meaning or conceptual content of a linguistic expression, it means that *definiendum* and *definiens* have the same extension; their difference is just that the former is closed, whereas the latter is disclosed. Roughly speaking, *definiendum* and *definiens* are synonymous; otherwise, *definiens* should not be regarded as a term that defines.