

11

A RETURN TO SIMPLE SENTENCES

David Pitt

In 1997, Jennifer Saul (1997) introduced a fascinating new puzzle into the philosophy of language literature by identifying cases of substitution failure in apparently extensional contexts. Her first example was the pair of sentences (1) and (2):

- (1) Clark Kent went into the phone booth, and Superman came out.
- (2) Clark Kent went into the phone booth, and Clark Kent came out.

We would expect that substituting 'Clark Kent' for the co-referential 'Superman' would always result in a sentence with the same truth value. Intuitively, however, it does not, since it is possible for (1) to be true while (2) is false. Yet these sentences do not contain any of the familiar opacity-inducing propositional-attitude, quotational, or modal constructions that are traditionally appealed to to explain such substitution failures. Why, then, does substitution fail? That is the puzzle.

A flurry of responses followed, and Saul's examples became a lively topic of debate. Ten years later she published a book, *Simple Sentences, Substitution, and Intuitions* (Saul 2007) in which she laid out her objections to all of the proposed solutions to her puzzle, as well as her own take on how best to solve it.

My own contribution to this discussion (Pitt 2001) was an attempt to solve the problem at the semantic level. I argued that failure of substitutivity in sentences like (1) and (2) is due to the fact that the relevant terms, 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent', are in fact not co-referential. What these names refer to is what I called "alter egos" of the Kryptonian Kal El. 'Kal El' refers to an individual, and 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' refer to distinct alter egos of that individual, where an alter ego is an individual inhabiting a persona.¹ I characterized a persona as consisting of certain ways of behaving or dressing that are deliberately contrived or adopted and kept separate from an individual's ordinary self-presentation. Superman is Kal-El-inhabiting-the-Superman-persona, and Clark Kent is Kal-El-inhabiting-the-Clark-Kent-persona. Since Kal El does not always inhabit these personas, he is not identical to either alter ego, and since he does not inhabit them simultaneously, they are not identical to each other. I further suggested that one may take alter egos—the referents of alter-ego names like 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent'—to be sums of four-dimensional time-slices of the underlying individual. Superman is the sum of time-slices of Kal El during which he is inhabiting the Superman persona, and Clark Kent is the sum of time-slices of Kal El during which he is inhabiting the Clark

Kent persona. Since these sums are distinct, the names are not co-referential, and so are not substitutable *salva veritate* in extensional contexts.

In this paper I would like to respond to several objections that have been made to my account.

Saul (2007) claims that my account cannot handle a kind of case introduced by Joseph Moore (1999). Imagine that Kal El is sitting at a desk at the *Daily Planet* dressed as Clark Kent but talking to Lois Lane on the phone as Superman. Imagine further that Lois is simultaneously looking through a window at him at his desk. Saul argues that (3), which is, intuitively, a correct way to describe the situation

- (3) While talking on the phone to Superman, Lois looked through the window at Clark Kent

cannot be true on the temporal slice account, since distinct temporal slices cannot be co-present: Lois “cannot be talking on the phone to one temporal part and at the same time looking at a different one” (Saul 2007, 31). “Pitt needs to be able to answer the question”, she continues (2007, 32), “of which persona Kal El is occupying when he is making eye contact with Lois as Clark while speaking to her on the phone as Superman” (I guess we should also suppose that she is not a good lip-reader).

Here is how I answer the question. In this situation Kal El is partially inhabiting both the Superman and the Clark Kent personas. That is, he is speaking as Superman while being dressed as Clark Kent. And while he is doing this he is neither Clark Kent nor Superman, but, rather, Kal El, exhibiting aspects of both personas (just as while he is in the shower he is neither Clark Kent nor Superman, and is exhibiting aspects of neither persona). This is no more problematic than someone dressed as Hamlet on stage talking and moving around like Ophelia. In this moment, the actor would be playing neither Hamlet nor Ophelia, but partially affecting characteristics of both.

The Superman and Clark Kent personas are Kal El’s creations, and he can do what he wants with them. If he is trying to maintain the deception that his two alter egos are in fact different individuals, he will take care not to be seen or recognized as simultaneously exhibiting aspects of both. But he can freely mix and match such aspects as he chooses (though, again, in doing so he is being neither alter ego). And he could make radical changes to them. For example, if he got tired of walking around as Clark Kent, he could arrange to have Superman confer the power of flight upon Clark Kent (telling some story about Kryptonian powers). And he could also, as Superman, “disguise” himself as Clark Kent, and be known to be doing as much by everyone, in order to serve some purpose (e.g., convincing some criminal that Clark Kent had been shot dead). There are many possibilities. In the story as it is, however, Kal El wants to keep the alter egos separate, at least so far as the citizens of Metropolis are concerned.

Saul also objects that my account gives “the very counterintuitive result that [(4)] and [(5)] below are false”.

- (4) Superman is Clark Kent.
 (5) Superman is Kal El.

She claims that I try to explain why people wrongly judge these sentences to be true as due to the fact that “they understand [them] as meaning the same as” (6) and (7):

- (6) The person whose alter ego is Superman is the person whose alter ego is Clark Kent.
 (7) The person whose alter ego is Superman is Kal El.

and that this is not likely to be true, since people who think that (4) and (5) are true are not aware of the facts about Kal El, Superman and Clark Kent (Saul 2007, 32–33.) On the contrary, however, anyone who is unaware of these facts would take (4) and (5) to be *false*, not true. The average citizen of Metropolis has no idea of the connections among Kal El, Superman, and Clark Kent. Anyone who

was inclined to accept that (4) and (5) are true has become aware of a hitherto unknown, because deliberately concealed, intimate relationship between individuals they formerly thought to be distinct. Saul notes that “most of us—myself included, until I read Pitt’s paper—have forgotten (if we ever knew) that there is a third individual [, (Kal El)] ... who adopted two alter egos” (2007, 33).

I think Kal El is a red herring here. Anyone who had forgotten or never knew about Kal El would likely be stumped by (7). What needs to be explained is the anti-substitution intuition—that is, why someone who is “enlightened” about the Superman/Clark Kent situation would accept that (1) and (2) could have different truth values. The “unenlightened” do not accept the substitution of names in (1) and (2) because they do not believe that Superman is Clark Kent—that is, they do not believe that ‘Superman’ and ‘Clark Kent’ are co-referential—that they are names of the same individual. The simplest explanation for why anyone who is enlightened would have the same intuition is that they too do not believe that the names are co-referential—in spite of their assent to ‘Superman is Clark Kent’. It seems to me that what Saul’s case shows is that the enlightened did not really believe what they thought they believed; for if they had, they would unproblematically accept the substitution—as they would in a case like (8) and (9):

- (8) Bon Iver went into the phone booth and Justin Vernon came out.
- (9) Bon Iver went into the phone booth and Bon Iver came out.

The way “enlightenment” is often characterized in the literature on the puzzle makes this explanation unavailable: to be enlightened is to know that Superman is Clark Kent (i.e., that ‘Superman’ and ‘Clark Kent’ refer to the same individual). But I think this is not the right way to characterize enlightenment—i.e., what one knows when one is in on the Clark Kent/Superman story. What one comes to know upon being enlightened is that the individual who flies around Metropolis in the cape is the same individual who sits behind a desk at the Daily Planet in black horn-rimmed glasses, and that part of the explanation for the different get-ups is his intention that this fact should not be obvious. If, once enlightened, an individual still uses the names differentially—as evidenced by, for example, the fact that certain substitutions are still rejected—there is reason to think that they have not come to believe that ‘Superman’ and ‘Clark Kent’ are co-referential, and hence intersubstitutable in all extensional contexts.

What I suggested in Pitt (2001) is that (4) and (5) are short-hand ways of saying what (6) and (7) say. Such short-hand uses of literally false identity sentences are in fact quite common. As I noted in my original paper, advertisements for movies, plays, etc., for example, often use sentences like (10) and (11)

- (10) Taron Egerton is Elton John.
- (11) Ruth Negga is Hamlet.

though everybody knows that they are, literally, false. What they mean is that Taron Egerton is *playing* Elton John (representing him in a movie about his life; the two men cannot be identical), and Ruth Negga is *playing* Hamlet (inhabiting the role on stage; no person could be identical to a fictional character). Someone who did not know who Taron Egerton, Elton John, Ruth Negga, or Hamlet is might take them to be literally true, just as someone who did not know the whole Kal El story might take (4) and (5) to be literally true. Someone who did know and who utters (10) or (11) might be challenged about whether what they say could be literally true. And it might take them some time to make explicit what they really meant. I see Saul’s cases as presenting a challenge to anyone who would utter (4) or (5) thinking it could be literally true, given their rejection of the inference from (1) to (2). Anyone who rejects the inference must, whether or not they can easily make it explicit, be thinking something else. Solutions appealing to guises, aspects or senses (e.g., Forbes 1997, 1999; Moore 1999; Predelli 1999) take the same approach.

A third objection is that my differential treatment of Superman/Clark Kent/Kal El cases and Batman/Bruce Wayne cases leads to problems (Saul 2007, 33–34). Saul argues that if it turns out that Kal El as Clark Kent got into fewer fights than he did as Superman, then on my view (12) comes out false, which she finds unproblematic:

(12) Clark Kent has been in more fights than Superman.

On the other hand, since inhabitants do whatever their alter egos do, if Bruce Wayne has only been in one fight as himself, but has been in ten fights as Batman, then on my view (13) comes out true:

(13) Bruce Wayne has been in more fights than Batman.

But Saul finds this counterintuitive. After all, Batman got into ten fights, while Bruce Wayne, out of persona, has only been in one. So, it would seem, Bruce Wayne has been in fewer fights than Batman. Saul argues, further, that it is counterintuitive to treat the cases differently, since they are, intuitively, alike.

However, it seems to me that the cases are not at all alike, since the first involves a comparison of two distinct alter egos, while the second involves a comparison of an alter ego and its inhabitant. More to the point would be a comparison between (13) and (14):

(14) Kal El has been in more fights than Superman.

I suspect that Saul would maintain that (14) is as counterintuitive as (13); but it seems to me that it is not. If we know the story, then we know that everything Superman does Kal El does, though not vice versa. So, if Superman has been in ten fights, Kal El was also in those fights. If Kal El got into one on a visit home to Krypton, as himself, it seems to me unproblematic to say that Kal El has gotten into more fights than Superman. He got into one as himself, and ten as Superman. That is eleven fights. Superman only got into ten. Eleven is greater than ten. Kal El got into more fights than the ones he got into as Superman. Likewise in the Batman case. While Bruce Wayne only got into one fight as himself, he got into ten as Batman. So, again, that is eleven fights: Bruce Wayne got into more fights than the ones he got into as Batman.

I suspect that Saul's qualms arise from treating the two cases in the same way—that is, from thinking that Bruce Wayne is something separate from Batman in the way that Clark Kent is something separate from Superman. But Bruce Wayne is not separate from Batman in this way. Batman is a proper part of him; Superman is not a proper part of Clark Kent. Suppose someone slaps my right cheek ten times and slaps me in the side of the head once. Since my right cheek is part of my head, my head has been slapped more times (eleven) than my right cheek (ten); even if it sounds counterintuitive to say so.

Finally, Saul objects that my account

is ill-equipped to deal with substitution failures involving names that are clearly not names for agents or their alter egos. St Petersburg has not created an alter ego, Leningrad; nor has Leningrad created St Petersburg as [an] alter ego. For Pitt, then, [(15) and (16)] must take the same truth value.

Saul 2007, 34

(15) I visited St Petersburg once, but I never made it to Leningrad.

(16) I visited St Petersburg once, but I never made it to St Petersburg.

But the essential feature of my account was to explain failure of substitutivity in the standard way—as owing to non-co-referentiality of substituted terms. The fact that the names in Saul’s original examples refer to alter egos on my account is incidental. I introduced the notion of an alter ego in order to substantiate the claim of non-co-referentiality in the examples Saul originally provided.

But this does not commit me to taking the referent of either ‘St Petersburg’ or ‘Leningrad’ to be a person, or an alter ego. Nor does it follow that (15) and (16) must have the same truth value. I took the referents of ‘Batman’ and ‘Bruce Wayne’ to be four-dimensional objects, where the former is a proper part of the latter. Precisely the same thing can be said of ‘Leningrad’ and ‘St Petersburg’.

If we are to make sense of the intuition that (15) can be truly uttered, then we must suppose that the speaker is enlightened about the fact that ‘St Petersburg’ and ‘Leningrad’ are names of the same city, and means to be saying something other than what would be said in an utterance of (16). The most obvious interpretation is that the speaker meant to say that she had never visited St Petersburg when it was called “Leningrad”, and did so in a short-hand sort of way, instead of uttering (17):

(17) I visited St Petersburg once, but I never visited it when it was called ‘Leningrad’.

This can easily be accommodated by taking the referent of ‘St Petersburg’ to be a four-dimensional object, and the referent of ‘St Petersburg when it was called “Leningrad”’ to be a spatiotemporal proper part of it.

And the same approach can supply an explanation of how an utterance of (18) (Saul 2007, 19) could be assessed as true while (19) is assessed as false:

(18) Shostakovich always signalled his connection to the classical traditions of St Petersburg, even if he was forced to live in Leningrad.

(19) Shostakovich always signalled his connection to the classical traditions of Leningrad, even if he was forced to live in St Petersburg.

The point of (18) is, of course, that the city Shostakovich was forced to live in had very different characteristics when it was called ‘Leningrad’ than when it was called ‘St Petersburg’. Since the relevant differences are not implicated by (19), (19) is, if not outright false, at least puzzling. But, again, the relevant failure of substitutivity *salva whatever* can be explained by taking the referents of ‘St Petersburg’ and ‘Leningrad’ to be distinct four-dimensional objects. So both of these examples can be accommodated by the approach I took in my 2001 paper.

Saul’s own solution to her puzzle relies on an analysis of intuitions and the psychology behind our judgments in her cases. She suggests that information associated with the name ‘Superman’ is stored separately from information associated with the name ‘Clark Kent’. She says that “despite our knowledge that ‘Superman is Clark Kent’ is true, we have a well-motivated and deeply ingrained habit of *not* always integrating *Superman* and *Clark* information” (Saul 2007, 138–139). “Sometimes, ... enlightened speakers well aware of particular identities will fail to make all the inferences that they could from the relevant identity claims” (Saul 2007, 145). And this can occur even if the enlightened are invited to reflect upon the identity sentence as (or just before?) they evaluate the inference. What needs to be explained is why anti-substitution intuitions persist “even as we are led through an inference that should (on my view) demonstrate that they are mistaken” (Saul 2007, 139). Thus, when we judge that the inference from (1) to (2) is invalid, it is because we are (for the moment?) under the influence of the separation of information about Superman and Clark Kent, forgetting, or ignoring the identity.

This strikes me as very implausible. In order for the enlightened to find the inference from (1) to (2) invalid, our belief that Superman is Clark Kent must somehow become unavailable. When we focus on (1) and (2), we are momentarily blinded to a belief we rehearsed moments before. But it is

hard to believe that we are so easily distractible. And can one not hold all three propositions before one's mind at once? Can one not think "This is weird. Though it's true that Superman is Clark Kent, it's also true that you can't infer from the fact that Superman leaps tall buildings that Clark Kent leaps tall buildings. What's going on here?"? Appreciating the puzzle requires comparing the intuitions and seeing that they are in tension. If we forgot the identity intuition every time we had the failure of substitutivity intuition, why would we find Saul's cases so fascinating to begin with?

Another critic of my solution to Saul's puzzle is Stefano Predelli. Predelli (2004, 109) accuses me of egregious selectivity with respect to which intuitions a solution to Saul's puzzle should save. In particular, he finds it "remarkable" that I end up denying that 'Superman is Clark Kent' is true.

But it is inevitable that one of the intuitions contrasted by Saul will be false, *since they are inconsistent*. That is why we have a paradox. It cannot be the case that Superman is identical to Clark Kent, yet Superman has properties (e.g., leaping tall buildings) that Clark Kent does not. So either Superman is not identical to Clark Kent, or they share all the same properties. One of our intuitions must be wrong.

Predelli finds it "even more remarkable" that I offer a different explanation for the Batman case than the Superman/Clark Kent case. He says that while I provide a "semantic rendering" of the intuitions in the Superman/Clark Kent cases, which (according to me) involve an individual and two distinct alter egos, I do not in the Batman cases, which, I claim, involve an individual and a single alter ego. So, whereas my account explains the failure of the inference from (1) to (2) as due to the non-co-reference of 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent', it does not explain the failure of inference from (18) to (19) in this way

- (20) Batman wears a mask.
- (21) Bruce Wayne wears a mask.

since, on my account, this inference does *not* fail. Hence, "the apparent parallel between [the cases] must be relinquished" (Predelli 2004, 110).

This objection shows a misunderstanding of my account, a feature of which is that relations between alter egos and relations between alter egos and their inhabitants are different. To compare Superman and Clark Kent is to compare alter egos. To compare Batman and Bruce Wayne is to compare an alter ego to the individual inhabiting it. The proper example to compare to (20) and (21) is (22) and (23):

- (22) Superman wears a cape.
- (23) Kal El wears a cape.

(21) is true because Bruce Wayne wears a mask when he is being Batman. (23) is true because Kal El wears a cape when he is being Superman. My account treats them in exactly the same way.

Predelli also claims that my account fails because there are conceivable situations in which one might judge (24) to be true

- (24) Clark Kent leapt over a tall building last night.

Whereas on my view this is never the case. But, again, Predelli has not completely understood my account. I did not claim that it is a necessary truth that Clark Kent does not leap tall buildings. It is a contingent fact that Kal El keeps his alter egos separate. He could change his mind at some point. (Recall the example above of Superman publicly conferring the power of flight upon Clark Kent.) Moreover, Kal El is free to fly home while dressed as Clark Kent; but, at least as things stand with respect to his management of his alter egos, in such a case he is not being Clark Kent, since flying is not a component of the Clark Kent persona.

Finally, Predelli (2004, n4) argues that my claim (Pitt 2001, 547) that

- (B) what is true of an alter ego is true of its inhabitant leads to contradiction, as shown by the following:
(25) Clark Kent is unlike Superman in that Clark Kent is shy.

Therefore,

- (26) Kal El is unlike Superman in that Kal El is shy.

But (26) is equivalent to (27)

- (27) Superman is unlike Kal El in that Kal El is shy.

From which, given (B), it follows that

- (28) Kal El is unlike Kal El in that Kal El is shy.

which is of course a contradiction: Kal El cannot be unlike himself.

Predelli is clearly right about this. It cannot be the case that *whatever* is true of an alter ego is true of its inhabitant, as can be shown by even simpler examples:

- (29) Superman is a proper spatiotemporal part of Kal El.
(30) Kal El is a proper spatiotemporal part of Kal El.
(31) Batman always wears a mask
(32) Bruce Wayne always wears a mask.

I concede that it is false that *whatever* is true of an alter ego is true of its inhabitant. But I do not think this constitutes a fatal problem for my account, since (B) is not an essential component of it. (B) was simply an incautious over-generalization of what I had in mind at that point in the paper, which was that Kal El *does* whatever Superman and Clark Kent do, as they are doing it, and Bruce Wayne *does* whatever Batman does, as he is doing it. And this is because an alter ego of an individual is that individual inhabiting a persona, and an individual does whatever that individual inhabiting a persona does while inhabiting it.

That said, I do not think Predelli's examples support his objection. It is, I maintain, not true that Clark Kent is shy and that Superman is unlike him in this respect. Clark Kent is an alter ego, a person inhabiting a persona; and what it is to inhabit a persona is, among other things, to *behave* in certain ways (which typically are not ways the inhabitant behaves when out of persona). A persona, as I use the term, is something like a *role* one plays. When Kal El is being Clark Kent, he is *acting*. Hence, what is true is that Clark Kent *acts* shy while Superman does not. And this is independent of whether or not Kal El is shy on his own time. Therefore, (25) is false. What is true is (33):

- (33) Clark Kent is unlike Superman in that Clark Kent acts shy.

It is certainly true that Kal El acts differently from Superman when he is in the Clark Kent persona (when he is being Clark Kent). But it does not follow that Kal El himself, on his days off, is, or acts, the way Clark Kent does. If it is a general truth about Clark Kent that he acts shy, it is because acting shy is part of the Clark Kent persona. But it cannot be inferred from this that it is a general truth about Kal El that he is, or acts, shy. So (25) also does not entail (34), from which a different contradiction could be derived:

(34) Kal El is unlike Superman in that he acts shy.

What is true is that Kal El acts shy *when he is being Clark Kent*, but not when he is being Superman:

(35) Kal El is unlike Superman in that he acts shy when he is being Clark Kent.

And this is true because Superman never *is* Clark Kent.

Note

- 1 In Pitt (2001) I used the term ‘primum ego’ to denote the individual whose inhabitation of a persona is an alter ego. I have never liked this term. Moreover, it is, I am told, bad Latin: since ‘ego’ is masculine, it should be ‘primus ego’. But I do not like that either. Here I will refer to the individual whose inhabitation of a persona is an alter ego of that individual as its “inhabitant”.

References

- Forbes, G. 1997. “How Much Substitutivity”, *Analysis* 57, 109–113.
Forbes, G. 1999. “Enlightened Semantics for Simple Sentences”, *Analysis* 59, 86–91.
Moore, J. 1999. “Saving Substitutivity in Simple Sentences”, *Analysis* 59, 91–105.
Pitt, D. 2001. “Alter Egos and Their Names”, *Journal of Philosophy* 98, 531–552.
Predelli, S. 1999. “Saul, Salmon, and Superman”, *Analysis* 59, 113–116.
Predelli, S. 2004. “Superheroes and Their Names”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 41, 107–123.
Saul, J. 1997. “Substitution and Simple Sentences”, *Analysis* 57, 102–108.
Saul, J. 2007. *Simple Sentences, Substitution, and Intuitions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.