

HOW TO BE A DIVINE TOPIC

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ABSTRACT

Divine names, i.e. the names religions use to speak of their god(s), pose a special problem to semantics. It is not only disputed whether they are proper names, descriptions, or names of kinds, the dispute between believers and non-believers over the ontological status of their bearers is a further obstacle to offering a single theory that can account for all divine names. But aboutness theory can come to the rescue here. Whatever terms divine names are, they pick out a subject matter, and whereas ontology is relevant to reference, subject matters need no corresponding object in the world. Believers and non-believers can therefore agree on the name bearers' status as topics of their conversation.

KEYWORDS

Divine names; proper names; subject matter; topics; aboutness.

INTRODUCTION

Divine names, i.e. the names religions use to speak of their god(s), pose a special problem to semantics. It is not only disputed whether they are proper names, descriptions, or names of kinds, the dispute between believers and non-believers over the ontological status of their bearers is a further obstacle to offering a single theory that can account for all divine names. In this paper, I will show that aboutness theory can come to the rescue here because, these disputes notwithstanding, participants in a conversation about bearers of divine names still have a common topic.

I will begin by explaining what the semantic problem of divine names consists in. In the next section, I will briefly outline how aboutness theory explicates the semantics of topics. In the final section, I will conclude that even if believers and non-believers disagree about the existence of the bearers of the divine names, they can agree on their status as topics of their conversation.

THE SEMANTIC PROBLEM OF DIVINE NAMES

Divine names raise a number of questions for semantics. The first of these concerns their status: are they proper names (supposing there is such a thing as proper names), or rather descriptions, or generic or kind terms?

Millian theories take proper names to be a linguistic tool of reference that points directly to its bearer, i.e. the object (broadly construed) that is so called. Non-Millian theories may differ about what links the name to its bearer, or whether or not there is a connotative element involved in the reference (we will get to one of these aspects below), but they, too, take proper names to serve as linguistic tools of reference. Are divine names such tools?

For some, like 'Jupiter', 'Pallas Athena', or 'Astarte', this may, at first sight, seem highly plausible. Reading classical texts of, say, Greek or Roman mythology, Pallas Athena and Jupiter are spoken of by their authors in the same way as people like Achilles or Iphigenia, and indeed Rose (1958) argues that use of these names was the sign of a personification of formerly rather vaguely conceived deities. So one would assume that from a language point of view, their names function in the same way as the names of people. However, in addition to their referential function, these names seem to have linguistic meaning (beyond what Frege would call 'sense'). Thus, dictionaries give the etymology of 'Zeus', for instance, as deriving from the root **dyeu-*, which is Indo-European for "to shine" and "sky", and 'Jupiter' in turn derives etymologically from 'Zeus' (Oxford English Dictionary; Online Etymology Dictionary; and American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language). Now, it may be argued that many other proper names have such meanings, too (think of all the flower names often given to girls), so that that need not even be an obstacle to a Millian theory of names. However, in the case of divine names, believers would not use these names for anyone or anything else. Dog owners who call their pet 'Jupiter' don't tend to venerate Jupiter. So, at least for believers, any descriptive element in the name may well serve as a definite description, and a descriptive theory may therefore seem more congenial.

However, the problem does not go away if divine names are taken to be more or less overt descriptions, either in the straight-forward sense of definite descriptions, or by adopting a description theory of names that take names to be short for, or backed up by, descriptions associated with them which will in turn pick out the bearer (cf. Russell or Strawson). Such a theory would seem particularly plausible for divine names like 'Toutatis', which means "god

of the tribe”, and overtly descriptive terms like “lord”, “king of the world”, etc. used by some religions, either generally out of respect – some even prohibit the mention of the divine name itself all together – or more specifically in order to preserve the use of their god’s “real” name for special occasions.

But there is a third option – yet other divine names seem to function more like generics or kind terms. The most prominent example is certainly ‘god’, but there is also ‘deity’ and ‘divinity’, for instance. While the latter two seem straightforwardly of the kind type, ‘god’ is often treated as if it were a proper name.

Now, in addition to the logical-linguistic issue just described, there is the problem of the ontological status of the bearer of the relevant name. This problem plays out differently for each of the above options, but affects them all in equal measure. For the Millian theory of proper names, the problem is that believers and non-believers disagree over whether the name has a referent. But on Millian theories, statements simply crash semantically when there is no bearer of the proper name, since the name’s only function is to pick out that bearer. So the worry is, how non-believers can take their statements to pick out anything, let alone the same – non-existent, according to them – object as the believers they are talking to.

The situation is not much better for description theories, where the dispute takes the shape of a disagreement on whether anything satisfies the description. If nothing does, reference fails here too. Note that even referential use along the lines of Donnellan’s theory is unavailable because there is then simply no referent from the non-believer’s point of view. Finally, for the third option of taking at least some divine names to be kind terms, the disagreement between believers, adherents of other religions, and atheists concerns the extension and/or essential characteristics of those kinds. So for all three theoretical options, it is not clear who or what the divine name is supposed to pick out; a suitable semantics is therefore not straightforwardly available.

But then, the question is how people can felicitously converse with one another using divine names? What makes their conversations, including prominently discussions about the existence of the bearer(s) of the name(s), talk about the same object(s)?

Here, aboutness comes to the rescue. But let us first see what aboutness is.

ABOUTNESS AND TOPICS

Aboutness is frequently associated with the philosophy of mind, but there is a distantly related research area in the philosophy of logic and language, with which we are here concerned, where ‘aboutness’ means the way a text relates to its subject matter or topic. It therefore contrasts with reference. Whereas reference is what picks out an object in the world, and thereby a cross-categorical relation between a linguistic tool – or its user – and a worldly referent, aboutness is an intra-categorical relation, either inter- or even intratextual, that makes no ontological demands on the subject matter it involves (for further details see Osorio-Kupferblum 2024). The distinction is prominent in the work of Ryle (1933a,b), Goodman (1961), and more recently de Ponte et al. (2020), although Ryle and Goodman, who are very early proponents of aboutness theories, don’t consider reference an issue completely apart from aboutness. But current work, such as Yablo’s (2014) and Fine’s (2017, 2020), takes a modal approach, thereby moving away from those early concerns. Instead, it regards subject matter as intimately linked to the meaning of the utterances whose subject matter it is.

We can therefore say that a subject matter or topic emanates from the text, but also restricts the domain of meaning of the text’s components. It is as interwoven with it as parts of speech are with the text’s syntax. Views vary with respect to the metaphysics of subject matter, and topics are more prominently distinguished by Plebani and Spolaore (2020), Berto and Hawke (2022), and Osorio-Kupferblum (2016) than by the above or Schipper (2020), for instance, but for present purposes we can ignore the differences.

Where contemporary accounts of aboutness give it a metaphysical backing, this is habitually modal. Thus in their currently most prominent accounts, Yablo and Fine use possible worlds and (im-)possible states respectively to model subject matter. But this means that subject matters are independent of how matters stand in our world. This has ontological repercussions important to the problem of divine names. Whereas the success of reference is dependent on the existence of the referent, and referents are logically prior to, and ontologically independent of, the referring term (a possible exception are self-referring linguistic devices like “this word”), a topic or subject matter depends ontologically on its text; although it can be shared between texts, it only comes about with a text.

DIVINE TOPICS

So, how can aboutness help with the semantics of divine names? The problem was that all the options outlined above are in some way committed to the existence of the bearer of the divine name. The upshot is that believers would be committed to an account that makes the relevant bearer semantically equivalent to the bearer of any other name, whereas non-believers would treat divine names like the names of fictional objects. As a result, it would be hard to see why they consider their conversations successful.

This disparity vanishes for topics. Whether or not a topic has something corresponding to it in reality, aka our world, qua topic it depends ontologically only on the text whose subject matter it is. Thus, whenever there is a text about the bearer of a divine name, that bearer is (one of) its topic(s). A text can be written or oral (De Beaugrande and Dressler 1981), so just like articles or books, a conversation between a believer and a non-believer constitutes a text for linguistic purposes. The bearer of the divine name is then their common topic, even though they disagree on whether that bearer exists in the world, and hence on whether they can successfully refer to him/her or not. In fact, even if the ontological status of the divine name's bearer is the very object of their conversation, as their common topic it is beyond dispute by the mere fact that they have a conversation about it.

The account has a number of advantages. One is its simplicity as far as the problem of divine names is concerned. Aboutness is complicated both conceptually and logically, but this need not concern us here since these complications are located on a meta-level vis-à-vis issues concerning specific topics or subject matters. The problem of divine names is thus divorced from the ontological worries that affect reference. This is a particular advantage for a subject matter which often itself involves ontological worries.

Another advantage is the fact that the account is homogeneous for all sorts of divine names, whether proper names (if such there are), definite descriptions, or names of kinds. Any linguistic tool that serves to denote a divine bearer will do as an anchor for a topic. Therefore, the account can cater for all sorts of denoting tools and their different logical standings will not affect their role with respect to the topic they stand for in the text in question.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that aboutness allows us to bypass the semantic issues afflicting divine names. Irrespective of what kind of term one takes divine names to be or which theory of names one favours, divine names can always stand for a subject matter. Subject matters or topics depend

ontologically only on a text; so as soon as there is a conversation, story, book, article or the like about some topic, that topic has been created and no further ontological commitment is necessary. Whether there is something or someone in reality corresponding to that topic or subject matter, is a different question that may indeed be part of what the text is about. But its solution is independent of the standing of the topic qua topic.

Therefore, even though believers and non-believers might not share a referent, they can still converse meaningfully about, and thus share, a common subject matter.

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