

Kypris, Aphrodite, Venus, and Puzzles About Belief

My aim in this paper is to show that the existence of empty names raise problems for the Millian that go beyond the traditional problems of accounting for their meanings. Specifically, they have implications for Millian strategies for dealing with puzzles about belief. The standard move of positing a referent for a mythical name to avoid the problem of meaning, because of its distinctly Millian motivation, implies that solving puzzles about belief, when they involve empty names, do in fact require reliance on Millianism after all.

1. Introduction

The classic puzzle about belief involves a speaker who lacks knowledge of certain linguistic facts, specifically, knowledge that two distinct names refer to one and the same object -- that they are co-referential. Because of this lack of knowledge, it becomes possible for a speaker to maintain conflicting beliefs about the object in question. This becomes puzzling when we consider the idea that co-referential terms ought to be intersubstitutable in all contexts without any change in meaning. But belief puzzles show not only that this is false, but that it can actually lead to attributing contradictory beliefs to a speaker. The question, then, is what underlying assumption is causing the puzzle? The most frequent response has been to simply conclude that co-referentiality does not make for synonymy. And this conclusion, of course, rules out the Millian view of names – that the meaning of a name is its referent.

Kripke, however, argues that belief puzzles are independent any particularly Millian assumptions. The belief puzzle, as described by Kripke, relies on only two principles – a principle of translation, and a principle of belief disquotation. That is, if we have two names that by standard practices are translations of one another, and if the contents of a sentence modified by a belief operator can be revealed by removing that operator and disquoting the remaining sentence, we can still generate the very same puzzle just mentioned. Because Kripke can

generate the puzzle using only these two principles, without any appeal to Millianism about proper names, he concludes that the puzzle does not rule out Millianism in particular.

Most treatments of puzzles about belief focus on cases of co-referential names. Instead, we will focus on a case in which we have synonymous mythical names, synonymous by ordinary language standards and practices. More specifically, we will focus on a case involving three different mythical names for the mythical goddess Venus.¹ As we will see, this sort of case poses a dilemma for the Millian: they must reject either our common translation practices -- the very phenomenon they rely on to illustrate that puzzles about belief are not truly puzzles for them; or they must reject the idea that mythical names are empty and instead maintain that they have referents after all.² But positing referents for empty names, is typically motivated by Millian commitments. Both horns of the dilemma, then, leave the Millian with no choice but to relinquish the idea that puzzles about belief are not independent of any Millian intuitions. And this is because she either cannot rely on her standard treatment of the classic puzzle about belief, or she must rely on Millian intuitions to sustain that treatment for those cases in which we have instances of mythical names that are synonymous by natural language standards.

2. The Classic Puzzle About Belief

Consider the following simple sentences whose truth values, intuitively, co-vary:

- (1) Hesperus rises in the evening
- (2) Phosphorus rises in the evening
- (3) Venus rises in the evening

The underlying reason for this co-variance is of course that Hesperus, Phosphorus, and Venus are the very same object. So, that what holds of one, must hold of the other.

¹ It is strange that other issues about substitution have been discussed with respect to examples containing fictional names, but that their potential emptiness was not raised in the discussion. For more on these other issues, see Braun & Saul (2002), Forbes (1999), and Saul (1999) and (1997).

² Of course, many do so, Kripke for instance (1973), as well as Braun (2005), and many others.

One account of the semantics of the proper names occurring in sentences (1)-(3) that would allow these sentences to express the truths that they in fact do is the Millian account. For the Millian, the names 'Hesperus', 'Phosphorus', and 'Venus' all refer to the same planet, and because of this, they have the same meaning, in this case, the referent Venus. On a classic Millian understanding of the meaning of proper names, on which the referent of a name exhausts its meaning, sentences (1)-(3) all express the same proposition, and therefore the covariance in question is easily explained.

But now consider the following complex belief sentences:

- (4) Benedicte believes that Hesperus rises in the evening
- (5) Benedicte believes that Phosphorus rises in the evening
- (6) Benedicte believes that Venus rises in the evening

As the puzzle is classically described, unlike sentences (1)-(3), we can imagine differences between the truth values of sentences (4)-(6). We can imagine, for instance, that Benedicte is an amateur astronomer, and therefore knows that Venus rises in the evening, but fails to know that either Hesperus or Phosphorus does. We can see, in this case, that sentences (4) and (5) are false, but (6) is true. However, if the Millian were correct, then substituting one co-referential name for another should not result in a change in the truth values of sentences embedding them. But, we just saw, as the classic puzzle has it, this is false for sentences (4)-(6).

The Fregean says that the failure of the substitution of co-referential names in belief contexts indicates that Millianism is false. A name must have a meaning distinct from its merely having a referent. Specifically, it must also have a sense that expresses a uniquely identifying property belonging to the referent of that name. If the Fregean is correct, she can easily explain why co-referential names fail to be substitutable in belief contexts, unlike her Millian counterpart -- they have different denotations in different contexts. Specifically, for the Fregean, in some contexts a name's denotation is a referent, and in others, its sense.

3. Kripke's Account of the Classic Puzzle

Kripke rejects the Fregean conclusion that the meaning of a name cannot be Millian, because he believes that the very same puzzle about belief can arise even without Millian assumptions. As mentioned, Kripke generates the puzzle relying only on our basic intuitive translation practices together with a belief disquotation principle.

Let us agree that the two names 'London' and 'Londres' are translations of one another. If correct, then we can imagine, as Kripke in fact does, that an English speaker unaware of this previous fact, might assert the following sentences:

- (7) Londres est jolie
- (8) London is not pretty

Relying on Kripke's translation and disquotation principles, the truth of two sentences above appear to entail that our English speaker has contradictory beliefs.³ She believes both that London is pretty and that London is not pretty. Assuming that speakers are rational, they will not have contradictory beliefs. Any theory of belief attribution, then, that attributes contradictory beliefs to a speaker, must be incorrect.

While the previous facts are puzzling, they are not puzzling because of any specific commitments about the meaning of our two names. Therefore, these puzzles about belief are independent of any Millian assumptions, and we can conclude that the puzzles provide us with no reason to reject Millianism.

4. Kripke's Millian Strategy

If Millianism is not the culprit in generating the puzzle, then, what is? We can extract a particular strategy that the Millian might pursue from Kripke's remarks about the classic puzzle about belief (1979: 379). Specifically, we can argue that the reason that belief contexts generate the

³ It is unclear whether the disquotation principle should be accepted at all -- that belief attributions should be understood on this model. Several people, including Buchanan (2012), Eaker (2009), and Goodman (2013), offer criticisms of this idea on various grounds. We will not evaluate those arguments here.

puzzles that they do is that certain contexts, those Kripke calls “referentially opaque” contexts, contexts like belief contexts, generate these puzzles, because these are contexts in which speakers mistakenly understand names as expressing some descriptive content or other with which they might be contingently associated. And, as is well-known, the descriptive contents associated with a particular proper name are not able to be substituted without a potential change in the relevant truth values. In contrast, in what Kripke calls “referentially transparent” contexts, this is false. This would allow the Millian to maintain her account of the meaning of proper names for belief contexts, while still recognizing that those contexts are problematic in some way.⁴ The differences, then, between belief contexts and simple contexts is epistemic, not semantic.

5. A New Puzzle About Belief

Consider three more simple sentences, sentences containing mythical names that, by ordinary translation practices, are synonymous.

- (9) Kypris arose from the sea
- (10) Aphrodite arose from the sea
- (11) Venus arose from the sea

One explanation for the synonymy of these sentences is that all of these names refer to one and the same mythical goddess Venus -- have the same Millian content -- and therefore, can be substituted for one another without a change in the meaning of the sentences in which they are embedded.⁵

However, like sentences (1)-(3) considered earlier, it is perfectly possible to believe one or more of (9)-(11), without thereby believing all of them. For instance, I might believe that Aphrodite arose from the sea, that Venus did, but not that Kypris did.

⁴ Another way of thinking of belief contexts is that in those contexts, speakers believe those propositions under certain guises, so that she may believe synonymous propositions under different guises and this explains the oddness involved in belief-ascriptions; see Braun (2005).

⁵ This response, is of course, offered by Kripke himself (1973). However, his response is motivated by reasons distinct from those that will be offered here.

As before, a standard reaction to this still classical version of the puzzle is to simply deny Millianism. Once again, however, we can instead understand the puzzle as generated not by Millianism, but rather by our standard translation practices along with a simple belief disquotation principle. A simple glance at Wikipedia, for instance, tells us that the names 'Kypris', 'Aphrodite', and 'Venus' have the same meaning, and assuming that the belief disquotation principle is true, we can see that a speaker can be attributed contradictory beliefs about the mythical goddess Venus. But this does not entail that the names in belief contexts are not Millian, only that they are occurring in referentially opaque contexts, and therefore, the Millian is not forced to give a semantic treatment of complex belief sentences that differs from the treatment she gives of simple sentences.

6. Why Millianism Fails to Solve the New Puzzle

Let us pause now, however, and note some differences between the standard puzzle and the puzzle just discussed. It is common, for instance, to deny that names like 'Kypris', 'Aphrodite', and 'Venus' have any referent whatsoever; these names are instances of empty names. Clearly, then, we cannot describe our mythical names as co-referring, since they have no referent. But neither can we deny that they have some kind of equivalence.

Now let us consider how Kripke's Millian strategy fares if we do assume that names like 'Kypris', 'Aphrodite', and 'Venus', are empty. The Millian strategy, considered earlier, is to claim that the reason belief contexts allow us to attribute contradictory beliefs to speakers, with respect to certain names, is that speakers in referentially opaque contexts confuse the actual meaning of a name with some associated descriptive content. However, if we assume that our different names for Venus are non-referential, we can reject this Millian explanation for our puzzle about belief, since the names in question have no meaning. It would therefore be

impossible for speakers to confuse these non-existent meanings with any contingently associated descriptive information in belief contexts.⁶

We might, however, respond to the previous conclusion as Braun does (2005). That is, we might argue that sentences containing mythical names, even if the names themselves have no meaning, can be used to express gappy propositions – propositions with at least a partial meaning save for an empty subject -- and can be believed for various good reasons. For example, we might believe the gappy proposition that Kypris arose from the sea due to our exposure to Greek mythology, and that proposition can be true or false. Furthermore, we can explain our reactions to belief contexts involving the names 'Kypris', 'Aphrodite', and 'Venus', by arguing that we hold beliefs about gappy propositions under different guises, and having guises do not depend upon those names having a referent.

Braun's approach, however, has distinct disadvantages independent of the issues presented here. For example, the view requires that the standard account of compositionality needs revision given that the proper names embedded in gappy propositions have no meanings. With respect to the issue at hand, on Braun's view, the reason sentences (9)-(11) co-vary in their truth values, if they have them at all, is that these sentences express the very same proposition; they express the same gappy proposition. But if this is correct, then substituting any empty name whatsoever should preserve the truth values of sentences (9)-(11), since they would still express the very same gappy proposition. For example, the sentence 'Sherlock Holmes arose from the sea' would express the very same proposition as 'Venus arose from the sea'. But if we can substitute any meaningless name for another, with the result that the

⁶ A Millian might respond by arguing that, in fact, speakers are confusing a meaningless expression for one that does have meaning. Clearly, however, this is not supposed to be analogous to a case in which speakers mistake a meaningless string of symbols like 'jkdfs' for a word that has meaning, since the idea that this is what speakers are doing is simply implausible on its face. The Millian owes us an account then of the difference between the previous case and her case.

substitution entails no difference in the proposition expressed, we have a rather implausible result. We must reject our common translation practices, since no speaker would translate the name 'Sherlock Holmes' as equivalent in meaning to the name 'Venus'. This account, then, would require rejecting our common translation practices, since it is not common practice to treat all empty names as inter-substitutable for one another.⁷

We can now see that the puzzle poses a dilemma for the Millian: she must either reject our standard practices of translation as legitimate, or she must reject that the mythical names at issue are really empty. That is, she cannot consistently maintain Millianism, our standard translation practices, and that 'Kypris' 'Aphrodite' and 'Venus' are instances of empty names. For suppose that the Millian does accept that the names in question are empty. If so, they cannot have a referent as their meaning. Suppose they also accept our common practice of translating the name 'Kypris' as either 'Aphrodite' or 'Venus'. Given the Millian's conception of the meaning of proper names, they should be translatable if and only if those names co-refer. Now, however, the Millian is committed both to the claim that our mythical names have a referent, and that they do not have a referent. One of these commitments must go.

If the Millian rejects our common practices of translation, then she can no longer rely on that principle in order to illustrate that puzzles about belief are not truly puzzles for the Millian per se. That is, rejecting our translation practices puts the Millian in the awkward position of rejecting facts that are supposed to immunize her from the Fregean reaction to classic puzzles about belief. The only other option is to reject that the mythical names in question are truly instances of empty names. However, this move itself appears to be motivated only by the idea that a proper name's true function is that of serving as a device of reference, an idea

⁷ Of course Braun might say instead that no empty name is able to be substituted for another, but this would need additional motivation given that, on his view, both the proposition that Santa has reindeer and that Holmes does are the very same proposition. And even so, while this would allow Braun to block substituting 'Santa' for 'Venus' in the sentence 'Venus arose from the sea', it would likewise block the substitution of 'Aphrodite' for 'Venus' as well.

characteristic of Millianism, but not necessarily of other views. Without some independent motivation for this latter idea, the Millian is guilty of making a move that is simply ad hoc.

A third kind of view, a metalinguistic view, due to Fine (2007) and Fiengo and May (2006) would have it that the names 'Kypris', 'Aphrodite', and 'Venus' are equivalent in virtue of the fact that they are linguistically linked, and therefore belong to the same equivalence class, roughly the class such that if they refer at all, they refer to the same thing. For Fiengo and May, the words themselves must be the same syntactic item, or at least the same at the level of logical form. For Fine, the words are primitively related in virtue of certain linguistic facts or practices. These views, then, respect our common sense intuitions about the synonymy of the mythical names in question, without positing a referent for those names. These names are empty, and they are members of the same equivalence classes, and so this view is not subject to the previous dilemma.

Fiengo and May build their notion of co-reference based on the phenomenon of co-indexing. And while it may be true that, at the level of sentence tokens, co-reference and co-indexing may coincide, at the level of sentence type, it is not at all clear that this is the case. For instance, at the level of sentence types 'Venus' is a name for not only the mythical goddess Aphrodite, it is also a name for the planet Venus. And our common translation practices are concerned with this level, with understanding sentence types and their equivalents, not with their tokens. If co-indexing occurs at the token level, and translation is concerned with the type level, then the Fiengo and May strategy cannot help explain why 'Kypris', 'Venus', and 'Aphrodite' are translations of one another.

If we turn instead to Fine's view, which does not require committing to the idea that our mythical names are one and the same syntactic item, but belong together in virtue of some primitive facts, we are left with no explanation, syntactic or semantic for why these names belong together, and of course this is unsatisfying.

Once again, it seems the only way out of the puzzle for the Millian is to posit a referent for our mythical names. A move that relies on the idea that the appropriate function of a proper name is to refer to individuals.

7. Conclusion

Since certain strategies fail to solve our new puzzle, it in fact does give us reason to reject Millianism. This is unlike other versions of the puzzle that are neutral about whether Millianism should be rejected. If correct, Kripke's claim that puzzles about belief provide us with no reason to reject Millianism is false; some of them, at least, do depend upon Millian commitments after all.⁸

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