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CAUSAL THEORY OF REFERENCE AND THE PROPER NAMES PUZZLE

Abstract: *This paper revisits Michael Devitt's causal theory of names through the classical Mark Twain / Samuel Clemens case to evaluate its ability to explain differences in informativeness and rational behaviour without resorting to Cartesian assumptions. Devitt originally claimed that distinct causal designation chains account for both meaning and informativeness. However, in his later work he rejects the idea that a theory of meaning must address epistemic matters, arguing that informativeness stems not from semantic differences but from the "law of identity" and surface dissimilarity between names. The paper challenges this separation by showing that semantic content—as causal mode of reference—cannot be detached from the subject's cognitive perspective if we are to make sense of reasoning and rational action. Through a sequence of inferential tests involving co-referential and non-co-referential names (Mark Twain / Samuel Clemens, London / Londres, Lieb knecht [Wilhelm/Karl]), it is shown that meaning must align with the subject's point of view to explain rational behaviour. When semantic content diverges from cognitive access, inference and reasoning become unintelligible. The upshot is that*

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Devitt's notion of linguistic competence as knowledge-how rather than knowledge-that does not eliminate the need for epistemic engagement within a theory of meaning. The paper concludes that informativeness and meaning are interdependent: items of whose sameness or difference the rational subject can be unaware cannot perform the role of meaning.

Keywords: *Causal theory of reference; proper names; informativeness; epistemic access*

1. Mark Twain

Consider the following true identity statements:

1. Mark Twain is Mark Twain
2. Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens.

According to Devitt, (1) and (2) differ in meaning because the names 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' have different senses in that they have underlying them designation chains of different types (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, p. 70). In other words, the co-referential names 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' differ in conventional meaning since there are two different causal networks that link the speaker with their referent, i.e. with the individual they both designate, as two different modes of reference.² As Devitt says, 'there are no differences in meanings, no semantic differences in names, without differences in networks' (Devitt 1981, 153; 2015, p. 135).

² To be sure, Devitt (2015, 110) calls the mode of reference of a (paradigm) proper name like 'Aristotle', "designation" while the mode of reference of a Russellian description he calls "denotation".

Devitt notes, though, that (1) and (2) differ not only in meaning but also in informativeness or cognitive value. While (2) is informative, (1) is not. He remarks that under the influence of the Cartesian assumption - that the competent speaker tacitly knows (facts about) meanings of her terms - many philosophers take the difference in informativeness to be the main reason for thinking that there is a difference in meaning (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 70; see also Devitt 2015, 131-132). A case in point is Frege (1892/1980) and other Fregeans who took informativeness of (2) to endow the names 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' with different Fregean senses, i.e. meanings. While Devitt had once held a similar view (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987), he has since become hostile to it and to this assumption.

In taking this new stance, he says:

The theory claims to explain all theoretically needed differences in the meanings of names, but what about differences in their "cognitive value" or informativeness? Once Cartesianism is abandoned, this epistemic matter is not something that any theory of names must explain (Devitt and Sterelny 1999, 70-1). (I was wrong about this in earlier works; e.g. 1989.) (Devitt 2015, 135, n. 65).

So how are we to account for the difference in informativeness or cognitive value between (1) and (2) short of this assumption given the correctness of the causal theory, not least because Devitt used to hold that a difference in the meanings of proper names such as 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' rests on the informativeness of (2) in virtue of the fact that these two names are linked to two different causal networks i.e.

two different designation chain types? Very easily, claims Devitt. The explanation simply does not depend on the causal theory. Statement (1) is uninformative because it hinges on “the law of identity” (see also Campbell 2002, 84-85 for a similar remark.) To understand ‘is (the same as)’ is to master “the law of identity”: for any x , x is x . For, any instance of this law will be an uninformative consequence of that understanding. An instance of this law contains occurrences of the same name of the same object. Being an instance of this law, (1) is uninformative. In contrast, (2) is not an instance of this law and does not seem to be an instance of it because ‘Mark Twain’ and ‘Samuel Clemens’ *sound* and *look* different. Hence, (2) seems to be informative. This way the difference in informativeness is explained without mentioning the causal theory. Short of adopting the foregoing Cartesian assumption, this explanation can be accepted by any theory of meaning (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 70).

To drop the given Cartesian assumption is to adopt: just because the names differ in meaning it does not follow that one knows that they do (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 71).³ The informativeness of (2) no longer depends

³ Although Devitt does not speak of epistemic transparency/opaqueness of meanings or contents, in claiming that it is wrong to think that we have Cartesian access to meanings (Devitt 2015, 131, n. 53) he seems to be hostile to a view such as Boghossian’s who holds that (a) if two of a thinker’s token thoughts possess the same content, then the thinker must be able to know a priori that they do; and (b) if two of a thinker’s token thoughts possess distinct contents, then the thinker must be able to know a priori that they do (Boghossian 1994, p. 36, 2011, p. 457), where “a priori” means “independent of outer experience” in a way that is

on the difference of the meanings of ‘Mark Twain’ and ‘Samuel Clemens’; (2) could be informative even if the names had the same meaning, i.e. if they were linked to the same designation chain type leading to the same referent. This entitles Devitt to claim: ‘It is no longer the job of the theory of meaning to explain anything about informativeness’ (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, p. 71; see also Devitt 2015, 132).

This is once again a departure from the claims that Devitt made earlier when he took designation chain types to account for informativeness which he now finds to be in line with the foregoing Cartesian assumption - that the competent speaker tacitly knows the meaning of her terms (Devitt & Sterelny 1987, p. 58).

2. The Twain Shall Meet

While it is no longer the job of the theory of meaning to explain anything about informativeness, its job it is to explain how we refer to what we refer in using a proper name, and the causal theory gives us the answer (see Devitt 2015, sect. 6.2 for details, esp. 131, for an attempt at a more precise formulation). In using a proper name such as ‘Mark Twain’ a competent speaker gets linked to a certain designation chain type that links her with its

consistent with knowledge being a priori if it is based on inner experience or introspection (see also Brown, 2004, ch. 5). However, in replacing the Cartesian view with the view that linguistic competence is an ability or skill (of which more below), Devitt seems to come close to what Wikforss (2015) calls functional transparency which does not concern access to contents but is rather the thesis that content is determined by cognitive role (as in reasoning concerning inferences to be discussed below). See also Stalnaker 2008, ch. 6; Murez 2024.

referent, i.e. Mark Twain, whereby it constitutes the name's conventional meaning or sense as its mode of reference. While on his earlier view (Devitt & Sterelny 1987, ch. 4) a designation chain type played the part of the (nondescriptive) mode of presentation of the name's reference as a way of thinking of reference, it has now become the causal mode of reference as its semantic value or semantic content (Devitt, 2015, 128, 131) of which 'the typical speaker knows nothing' (Devitt 2015, 132). But, in an interesting twist, Devitt says:

But often we are interested in explaining or predicting a speaker's behavior. Then we are interested in the *way* a person thinks about something. So, we are interested in the name's mode of reference. Thus, suppose Abigail has a neighbor called "Samuel Clemens" and reads books by someone called "Mark Twain." On hearing someone report, "Mark Twain is at the Town Hall," she rushes there, saying, "I'd love to meet Mark Twain." It makes all the difference to our explanation of Abigail's behavior that she said this, not, "I'd love to meet Samuel Clemens." For, the former expresses a thought that causes her to rush to the Town Hall whereas the latter expresses one that might not have (because she may not know that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens). It matters to the explanation of her behavior that her utterance refers to Twain/Clemens *under the mode of 'Mark Twain.'* Our theoretical interest in languages in general leads to an interest in 'Mark Twain's' property of referring to Twain/Clemens in a certain way. I call this mode of referring a "meaning" because, given its role, it is the sort of

property that should motivate our theoretical talk of “meanings” in the first place. But, whether it is called a “meaning,” “semantic value,” or whatever, the mode is as theoretically interesting a property of a name as its having a certain referent (Devitt, 2015, 133).⁴

But, how are we going to square this with Devitt’s view that the typical speaker knows nothing about the causal modes of reference or with his claim that just because the names differ in meaning, i.e. in the modes of reference, it does not follow that one knows that they do? In the passage quoted, Devitt suggests that the causal modes of reference serve to explain Abigail’s behaviour, thanks to the fact that her utterance of ‘I’d love to meet Mark Twain’ expresses a thought that is different from a thought expressed by her utterance of ‘I’d love to meet Samuel Clemens’, which requires Abigail to know that they are different whereby the modes of reference play the modes of presentation role.

But, if so, it is the case that a theory of names needs to explain this epistemic matter, Devitt’s foregoing claims to the contrary notwithstanding, which apparently commits him to Cartesianism that he wishes to avoid. But, instead of trying to unpack the foregoing Cartesian assumption that the competent speaker tacitly knows

⁴ On a similar note, in talking about the case of a person living a double life, one as a burglar, the other as a wealthy aristocrat, but, by chance, known as ‘George’ in both lives (1996, 167), Devitt says: ‘Given our theoretical interests in explaining behaviour, we *should* distinguish the conventional meanings of these two uses of ‘George’ just as much as we *do* distinguish the meanings of ‘Samuel Clemens’ and ‘Mark Twain’ (Devitt 2015, 135). Meanings are once again distinguished for the sake of explaining the subject’s behaviour!’

(facts about) meanings of her terms, it will be more fruitful in the present context to focus on Devitt's suggestion concerning the epistemic matters in safeguarding himself from Cartesianism:

We should embrace the much more modest view that linguistic competence is an ability or skill, a piece of knowledge-how not knowledge-that (Devitt 2015, 132; see also Devitt 2006).

If so, Cartesianism is no longer a threat to the view that Devitt wishes to abandon: that a theory of names needs to deal with epistemic matters and the explanation of the subjects behaviour, i.e. that the questions about meaning are inseparable from the questions about informativeness.

3.The Twain Inference

That a theory of names does indeed need to deal with the explanation of the subject's behaviour is shown when we turn to inferences. Note that in being a name's semantic content of which 'the typical speaker knows nothing', its meaning as the causal mode of reference features in truth-functional inferences. This makes it the case that the things over which we define inferences are not the things to which we appeal in explaining the subject's behaviour. As a result, we cannot make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way, as Bermudez (2016, 47) aptly puts it in a somewhat different context. In view of this, consider the following inference in which the two occurrences of

‘Mark Twain’ have the same meaning and thereby the same semantic content:

(I) Mark Twain is the author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Mark Twain is the author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

So, someone is the author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Inference (I) is valid in that the truth of the premises entails the truth of the conclusion. But, this is directly linked to the fact that in going along with inference (I) the subject is behaving rationally in that according to her point of view the two premises represent the same person. To paraphrase Devitt, it matters to the explanation of her behaviour that both her utterances refer to Twain/Clemens under the mode of ‘Mark Twain.’ Insofar we can make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way. As a result, she recognizes a simple valid inference as valid.

As for (2), in which the two names have different meanings and thereby different semantic contents, an analogous inference looks like this:

(II) Mark Twain is the author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Samuel Clemens is the author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

So, someone is the author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Although the premises and the conclusion are true, due to the difference in the semantic contents expressed by the premises the inference is invalid. (To make it valid, we need the extra premise: ‘Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens’.) This is directly linked to the fact that a person such as Abigail who is unaware that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens will behave rationally in that according to her point of view the premises do not represent the same person. It matters to the explanation of her behavior that her first utterance refers to Twain/Clemens under the mode of ‘Mark Twain’ while her second utterance refers to him under the mode of ‘Samuel Clemens’. Insofar we can make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way. She will not go along with (II) and will not take an invalid inference for a valid one.

4. The London Town

So far, Devitt’s meanings as semantic contents line up with the subject’s rational behaviour and can be seen as performing a traditional job of belief content: that of capturing the subject’s point of view. In going along with (I), the subject behaves rationally in being in the same psychological state while deploying the two premises, which is one of representing the same person. Hence, there is no mismatch between the psychological state that she is in and the semantic contents of the names featured in the premises in that she is linked to the same causal network. Conversely, in refraining from going

along with inference (II), the subject's rational behaviour is a result of her being in two different psychological states while deploying the two premises, which is a matter of her representing two different persons, such that it might be or will be informative for her, as it will be for Abigail, to be told that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens. Again, there is no mismatch between the psychological states that she is in and the semantic contents of the names featured in the premises in that she is linked to two different causal networks. In so doing, she has not confused a single semantic content for two different ones much as she has not confused two different semantic contents for a single one. We can make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way.

However, recall Devitt's claim that (2) could be informative even if the names had the same meaning which entails that two names may have the same meaning while the subject fails to know that they do. A case in point can be derived from Devitt (2015, 135) who, in following Kripke (1979) claims that names 'London' and 'Londres' mostly count as having the same meaning but the subject takes them to refer to two different cities. As a result, she will refrain from making the following inference:

(III) London is large

Londres is pretty

Something is large and pretty

Taking it that 'London' and 'Londres' have the same meaning, i.e. the same semantic content, there is a

mismatch between this content and the psychological states that the subject is in that are informed by her point of view which is one of representing two different cities. This clearly shows that semantic content cannot account for her rational behaviour which lines up with her point of view. What is more, given that ‘London’ and ‘Londres’ for Devitt have the same semantic content, inference (III) is valid but the subject does not know this. We cannot make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way.

5. The Spartacus Revolt

As for Devitt’s foregoing claim that just because the names differ in meaning it does not follow that one knows that they do, think of a case in which two different names name two different individuals while the subject fails to know this. To adapt an example from Devitt (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 4.2), suppose the subject who reads a book on German history, in which the surname ‘Liebknecht’ looms large, takes Wilhelm Liebknecht to be the same person as his son of Karl Liebknecht in a way that makes her is separately linked to the two causal networks related to the names ‘Liebknecht [Wilhelm]’ and Liebknecht [Karl]’ in that ambiguity is avoided (unlike with Devitt’s original example that deals with ambiguity). That the two names look and sound the same helps conceal the fact that they have different meanings. As a result, she will be disposed to go along with the following inference (note that both premises are true):

(IV) Liebknecht [Wilhelm] is the
author of *Ein Blick in die Neue Welt*
Liebknecht [Karl] is the author of
Militarismus und Antimilitarismus

Somebody is the author of *Ein Blick in die Neue Welt* and *Militarismus und Antimilitarismus*.

As supposed, there are two separate causal networks here as two different modes of reference or two different semantic contents, one linking the subject to Wilhelm Liebkecht, the other linking her to Karl Liebkecht. One network constitutes the conventional meaning of the one name, the other network constitutes the conventional meaning of the other name. As a result of the subject's ignorance, there is a mismatch between these contents and the psychological state that she is in that is informed by her point of view which is one of representing a single person. This clearly shows that contents cannot account for her rational behaviour which lines up with her point of view. What is more, given that 'Liebknecht [Wilhelm]' and 'Liebknecht [Karl]' have different semantic contents, inference (IV) is invalid but the subject does not know this. We cannot make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way.

6. The Upshot of the Revolt

The upshot of the foregoing discussion is that if we take modes of reference to be conventional meanings or semantic contents of proper names, they need to serve to

explain the subject's behaviour in conformity with her own point of view, capturing which requires that a rational subject does not confuse one content for two different ones or two different contents for a single one (as a matter of her aforementioned linguistic competence as an ability or skill rather than of having Cartesian access to the sameness and difference of these contents).⁵ This is required so as to make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way.

If this is correct, we need to account for inference (III) on a par with inference (II). As Abigail's first utterance refers to Twain/Clemens under the mode of 'Mark Twain' while her second utterance refers to him under the mode of 'Samuel Clemens', so does the given subject's utterance of 'London' refer to London under the mode of 'London' while her utterance of 'Londres' refers to London under the mode of 'Londres'. In capturing her point of view, these modes play the role of the modes of presentation similarly as on Devitt's earlier view that he has since abandoned. In taking the subject to think of London under two different modes of presentation, inference (III) turns out invalid and in refraining from going along with it the subjects behaves rationally. This enables us to make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way.

⁵ Given that on his early view Devitt took the meanings to be non-descriptive modes of presentation, it comes natural to see them this way although this is not a compulsory move. We also have at our disposal a relational view such as one propounded by Fine (2007) that could serve to explain the foregoing inferences. According to such a view, "meanings" of proper names are individuated in terms of relations amongst them rather than in terms of their epistemic features such as Fregean senses (modes of presentation), but since such a view is out of the spirit of Devitt's (old and new) account of names, I shall not pursue this line here.

As for inference (IV), it needs to be accounted for on a par with inference (I). This is to say that the subject's taking it that 'Liebknecht [Wilhelm]' and 'Liebknecht [Karl]' refer in the same way makes it the case that she is deploying the same mode of reference in the premises (rather than two different ones of whose difference she is unaware). By parity, this is supported by the fact that in the reverse case in which the subject such as Abigail has confused a single person for two different ones is credited with deploying different modes of reference. Making sense of the subject's behaviour - in conformity with her point of view which is one of representing a single person - requires this.

It is to be noted, though, that unlike with inference (I) where the subject's two utterances of 'Mark Twain' refer to Twain/Clemens under the mode of 'Mark Twain', in the case of inference (IV) the subject's two utterances of 'Liebknecht' fail to refer because the mode of reference of 'Liebknecht' fails to refer. It fails to refer because it rests on a false presupposition of identity.⁵ To be sure, ascribing a single mode of reference to the subject here is a consequence of the noted fact acknowledged by Devitt that our theoretical interest in languages leads to an interest in a name's property of referring in a certain way. As a result, this mode of referring is 'a "meaning" because, given its role, it is the sort of property that should motivate our theoretical talk of "meanings" in the first place' (Devitt 2015, 133). In view of this, we can make sense of the idea of reasoning one's way toward acting in a certain way although the given mode of reference fails to refer. If we take names' meanings to line up with their modes of reference, then we need to set them apart from the causal networks which turn out not to be their (conventional) meanings, but I will not pursue this matter here lest I get entangled in the issue as to

whether the role of such causal networks is semantic or presemantic (as in Almog 1984).⁶

7. Before the Revolt

Back to where we started from, it is part of this view that informativeness indicates a meaning difference, something that Devitt acknowledges in tackling the Abigail case in spite of officially abandoning it. This is to say that meanings line up with the subject's point of view for reasons stated above. Extending our discussion from inferences (I) and (II) - that are of a piece with statements (1) and (2) - to inferences (III) and (IV) should make this clear by way of highlighting that items of whose sameness or difference the rational subject can be unaware cannot play the meaning role.

⁶ See Recanati (2019) for a similar remark. In taking mental files to play the mode of presentation role, he takes it that the subject similar to the one who has confused the two Liebknichts can perform a genuine inference although the file fails to refer in that there is an inference in the sense of a transition between representational thought-vehicles. And, there is also something at the level of "cognitive content" that the subject knows in deploying a confused file: that she refers to the same individual twice provided that she succeeds in referring. This help us make sense of the idea of reasoning her way toward acting in a certain way.

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