

The problem of conflicting restrictions

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Last time we discussed a number of different versions of Conciliatory Millianism, which tries to complicate the semantics of attitude ascriptions so as to block intuitively problematic substitutions of coreferential (and hence, for the Millian, synonymous) proper names.

One initially plausible way of giving such a semantics for attitude ascriptions is open to the *problem of conflicting restrictions*.

Intuitively, what we want to do is restrict the permissible substitutions of names in attitude ascriptions, to block inferences like

Lois believes that Superman flies.

Lois believes that Clark Kent flies.

A natural thought here is that our semantics for attitude ascriptions should have the following rough shape:

An ascription $\ulcorner A$ believes that $S \urcorner$ is true iff (A has a belief with the content of S in the context of the ascription and A would express that belief using a sentence suitably related to S)

This sort of semantics diverges from the naive relational theory in putting an extra condition on the truth of an attitude ascription. What we want to know is: what does it take for a sentence to be suitably related to S ? However we answer this question, we want results like the following: if we are ascribing a belief to Lois Lane, if S contains ‘Clark Kent’, then a sentence suitably related to S must also include ‘Clark Kent’ (rather than, for example, ‘Superman’).

If some theory of this sort were right, then it seems clear that which sentences are suitably related to S depend on the subject of the ascription. For we who are in the know, ‘Superman’ and ‘Clark’ can perhaps be substituted freely, whereas when we’re talking about Lois, we need to restrict the class of suitably related sentences.

There also might well be some sentence S which, for different subjects, generates conflicting restrictions, in the following sense: the set of sentences suitably related to S for one subject and the set of sentences suitably related to S for the other subject have no members in common. For example, suppose that I think that Hammurabi thought that the brightest star visible in the morning was all powerful (he thought that the brightest star visible in the evening was quite weak). Then, when I say

Hammurabi thought that Venus was all powerful.

what I say is true only if Hammurabi had a belief with the content of ‘Venus was all powerful’ which he would express using a sentence which he would use to describe the brightest star visible in the morning.

However, I think that the Babylonians had a quite a different view of the relative powers of the stars; they all believed that the brightest star visible in the *evening* is all powerful. So when I say

The greatest leader of the Babylonians thought that Venus was all powerful.

what I say is true only if the greatest leader of the Babylonians had a belief with the content of ‘Venus was all powerful’ which he would express using a sentence which he would use to describe the brightest star visible in the evening.

The problem comes in when the utterer of the ascription, rather than the subject of the ascription, is confused about someone’s identity. The above case is such an example; Hammurabi is the greatest leader of the Babylonians. This means that when I say

Hammurabi thought that Venus was all powerful.

what I say is true only if Hammurabi has a belief with the right content which he would express by some sentence which he would both use to describe the brightest star visible in the morning and the brightest star visible in the evening. But Hammurabi does not think that the brightest star visible in the morning is the brightest star visible in the evening, so there is no name he would use to describe both. So, in this context, there is no sentences suitably related to any sentence involving the name ‘Venus’ when Hammurabi is the subject of the ascription. It follows that any ascription of a belief to Hammurabi using the name ‘Venus’ is false. But this is very implausible. Surely, for example,

Hammurabi thought that Venus was Venus.

should be true.