

# An argument against ‘descriptive Millianism’

PHIL 93914  
Jeff Speaks

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The Unrepentant Millian explains apparent differences in informativeness, and apparent differences in the truth-values of attitude ascriptions, in terms of genuine differences in propositions pragmatically conveyed by the relevant sentences. So which propositions are conveyed by the relevant sentences? One possibility is that, for example,

(1a) Hesperus is Venus.

conveys a descriptively enriched proposition like that expressed by

Hesperus, the brightest object in the morning sky, is Venus.

which has the form

(1b) [the  $x$ :  $x$  is the brightest object in the morning sky &  $x=o$ ]  $x$  is Venus.

relative to an assignment of Hesperus to the free variable ‘ $o$ ’, whereas the sentence

(2a) Phosphorus is Venus.

conveys

Hesperus, the brightest object in the evening sky, is Venus.

which expresses

(2b) [the  $x$ :  $x$  is the brightest object in the evening sky &  $x=o$ ]  $x$  is Venus.

Since (1b) and (2b) express different propositions, (1a) and (2a) convey different propositions.

How is all of this supposed to help with Frege's puzzle? The idea is that lots of times our intuitions about informativeness and truth-value track propositions pragmatically conveyed by utterances of a sentence in a context, rather than the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence relative to the context. This is how the Unrepentant Millian explains away the apparent difference in informativeness between 'Hesperus is Hesperus' and 'Hesperus is Phosphorus', and the apparent difference in truth value between some embeddings of these sentences in propositional attitude ascriptions.

Caplan (2007) gives an interesting argument against this view, which he calls 'descriptive Millianism.' The argument has two steps:

1. Descriptive Millianism is open to Kripke's arguments against standard descriptivism.
2. Suppose that the descriptive Millian can come up with a reply to those arguments. Such a reply will then be available to the standard descriptivist as well, in which case Kripke's arguments against descriptivism fail, and there's no reason to be a Millian.

Consider Kripke's modal argument against the descriptivist who identifies the meaning of 'Hesperus' with 'the brightest object in the evening sky.' One way to view this argument is as pointing out that the first of these sentences expresses a necessary truth, while the second does not:

- (3) If the brightest object visible in the evening sky exists, then the brightest object visible in the evening sky is the brightest object visible in the evening sky.
- (4) If Hesperus exists, then Hesperus is the brightest object visible in the evening sky.

Since it follows that there is some world with respect to which the proposition expressed by (3) is true but the proposition expressed by (4) is not, these sentences must express distinct propositions.

But consider what the Millian descriptivist will say about (4): surely he will say that an utterance of this sentence will pragmatically convey the descriptively enriched proposition expressed by

- (5) If Hesperus, the brightest object in the evening sky, exists, then Hesperus, the brightest object in the evening sky, is the brightest object visible in the evening sky.

But (5) expresses a necessary truth. Since (according to the descriptive Millian's solution to Frege's puzzle) our intuitions about truth conditions often track the truth conditions of the proposition pragmatically conveyed rather than semantically expressed by an utterance, the descriptive Millian should therefore say that we should have the intuition

that (4) is a necessary truth. But we have no such intuition — as Kripke assumed in his argument against the Fregean descriptivist. So, like the Fregean descriptivist, the Millian descriptivist is committed to thinking that speakers should regard (4) as necessary (and, by parallel reasoning, as a priori).

I think that the Millian descriptivist has a plausible reply here. Remember that the core idea is that we often ignore the proposition semantically expressed by a sentence, and focus on the proposition that that sentence might be used to communicate. (There are complications here about uses of sentences in thought, but ignore this for now.) How do we tell, given a sentence and a context, what the sentence would convey as used in that context? This is a difficult question, but it is plausible that among the determinants of what is pragmatically conveyed are normal purposes of conversational participants. So, for example, when someone utters a sentence which is obviously false, like

You are the cream in my coffee.

we focus on some other, true proposition which the person might have had in mind.

We also set aside, for the same reason, trivial or uninformative utterances. If someone says

Notre Dame is Notre Dame.

you naturally search for some proposition they might be conveying, besides the trivial identity statement. But the descriptive enrichments that Caplan focuses on just are trivial and uninformative propositions. Given that (5) is trivial and (4) is not, it is unsurprising that, even if uses of ‘Hesperus’ often do convey descriptively enriched propositions, utterances of (4) would not convey the propositions expressed by (5).

The basic idea here is simple. Just because some uses of sentences involving a name involve communication of some descriptive content  $F$ , it does not mean that all such uses will. When we consider utterances of

Hesperus is Phosphorus.

we naturally hear the descriptively enriched proposition

Hesperus, the object most clearly visible in the evening sky, is Phosphorus, the object most clearly visible in the morning sky.

On the contrary, if in response to someone’s asking whether any planets are visible I say

Hesperus is over there.

it is natural to think that I communicated the proposition expressed by

Hesperus, the planet, is over there.

There's nothing odd about the idea that the descriptive information associated with the name is different in the two cases.

Typically, the extra descriptive information is in there to provide some further information relevant to the conversational purposes. But in Caplan's cases, the descriptive supplementation erases the relevant information, by forming a proposition logically weaker than the propositions semantically expressed by the sentence. For this reason, we should in general expect that when we have a sentence

$n$  is  $F$ .

that the descriptive information which gets communicated will *not* be

$n$ , the  $F$ , is  $F$ .

since this clearly does not aid the purposes of the parties to the conversation.

So what would get conveyed by an utterance of

(4) If Hesperus exists, then Hesperus is the brightest object visible in the evening sky.

if not (5)? The right answer for the Millian is that it depends on the conversational setting. One of the problems here is that it is hard to imagine using this sentence in a conversation. But suppose that you are having a debate with a skeptic about planets and also with someone who is interested in the question of whether they can see a planet in the evening sky. Then you might, in the interests of making no assumptions rejected by your conversational partners, utter (4). In that case, you'd likely convey something like

If Hesperus, the planet, exists, then Hesperus, the planet, is the brightest object visible in the evening sky.

which doesn't, as far as I can see, open the Millian descriptivist to any Kripke-style objections.

Suppose that this is how the Millian descriptivist should respond to Caplan's first argument. But how about the second step of his argument: the claim that whatever response the Millian descriptivist can give is also available to the Fregean descriptivist so that, even if Millian descriptivism can be saved, its motivation is undercut.

I think that this argument fails, for two reasons: first (and less important) is that the Millian descriptivist is not committed to every use of a sentence involving a name communicating some descriptive content; maybe some uses of sentences involving names just

communicate bare singular propositions. So the Fregean can't appeal to 'whatever description the Millian descriptivist uses.' And even when the Millian does appeal to descriptive content, there is no reason why the descriptions in question will have to be proper descriptions, as the Fregeans' clearly must (at least on orthodox versions of Fregeanism, on which propositions can't contain objects as constituents).

Second, as the above makes clear, the Millian descriptivist should say in responding to Kripke-style arguments that different uses of a single name standardly communicate different descriptive information about the referent. The Fregean can say this, but only by making his position extremely implausible. It is very implausible that 'Hesperus' has no fixed meaning, even if it is very plausible that the name can be used in different communicative settings to convey various things about the planet. The sort of variability which seems appropriate at the level of pragmatics seems outlandish when recast as a claim about the meanings of names. (Even if this is an outlandish view that Frege and Russell seem to have held at various times.)

Caplan's examples do not undermine Millian descriptivism. On the contrary, they neatly illustrate the Millian descriptivist's advantages over her (very distant) Fregean cousin.

### References

Ben Caplan, 2007. Descriptive Millianism. *Philosophical Studies* 133:181–198.