

Global supervenience and supervenience at a time

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Let's distinguish between two different sorts of supervenience theses that one might endorse:

Global supervenience of meaning on mental content

It is not the case that there are two possible worlds alike with respect to every propositional attitude of every subject, but different with respect to the semantic content of at least one expression.

Supervenience of meaning on mental content at every time

It is not the case that there are two worlds, w and w^* , such that at some time t in w and some time t^* in w^* , the two worlds are alike with respect to every propositional attitude of every subject, but different with respect to the semantic content of at least one expression.

I've said that I think that the first of these is true. But I don't think that the second one is. Consider the following sort of case:

In 2695, a historian of American sports is going through some old magazines in the archives, and comes across a story about someone named 'Pete Rose.' The story talks about how he was banned from baseball for betting on games, etc. etc.

The historian then leaves the archives and says to a friend, 'I read about this guy, Pete Rose. He was an interesting character ...' We can imagine that in 2695 there are only a few historians of American sports, and so that, prior to this historian delving into the archives, no one had any thoughts, beliefs, or other propositional attitudes about Pete Rose. Nonetheless, it seems that in 2695, 'Pete Rose' has a meaning.

One might want to deny that the name has a meaning in 2695 before being encountered by the historian. But this does not look plausible. For then the historian is effectively introducing a new name into the language. And how could the historian introduce a name which genuinely refers to Pete Rose — as the historian's uses of the name seem to? (We can imagine that the archives do not provide uniquely identifying information, if that matters.) To put the same point another way: if the name lacked a meaning when the

last person with beliefs about Pete Rose died, and it acquired a meaning in 2695, what gave it the meaning it acquired in 2695? It's hard to see how it could 'automatically' reacquire the same meaning it had unless it simply had that meaning all along.

So let's suppose we grant this. This seems to show that the above 'Supervenience at a time' thesis fails. For we can imagine a world where 'Pete Rose' was the name of someone else, but which is an exact replica of the 2695 world with respect to the propositional attitudes of the world's inhabitants.

Is this sort of phenomenon limited to names?

- It is certainly not limited to names of people — place names, event names, etc. will all work the same way.
- Natural kind terms also seem like an easy case — imagine a name for an extinct and now-forgotten species.
- Can you think of cases which will work for any other sorts of expressions?

What does this mean for views about the foundations of meaning? One consequence is that you can't analyze the meaning of a word at t in terms of the propositional attitudes of users of the language at t . This seems to rule out the simplest versions of the Gricean and belief-based analyses.

It also strongly suggests that we should think about meaning in terms of the Kripkean distinction between term introduction and meaning transmission — at least for those expressions for which the above sort of example can be generated.