

Millian descriptivism defended

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Abstract I reply to the argument of Caplan (Philos Stud 133:181–198, 2007) against the conjunction of Millianism with the view that utterances of sentences involving names often pragmatically convey descriptively enriched propositions.

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One version of Frege's puzzle asks for explanations of apparent differences in informativeness between identity sentences which differ only by the substitution of coreferential names, and of apparent differences in truth-value between attitude ascriptions which, again, differ only by the substitution of coreferential names. Fregeans of various sorts respond to these puzzles by positing genuine differences in the propositions expressed by the relevant identity sentences, and genuine differences in the truth-values of the relevant attitude ascriptions. This is a response to the puzzle which Millians about names—at least those who accept the principle that sentences which differ only in the substitution of expressions with the same semantic content can't express different propositions¹—can't give. So what should a Millian say?

One sort of Millian explains the 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 intuitively plausible suggestion is that, for example,

[1] Hesperus is a planet.

¹ Fodor (1990) is an example of a Millian who rejects this sort of principle.

conveys a descriptively enriched proposition like that expressed by

[2] Hesperus, the brightest object in the morning sky, is a planet.

which has the form

[3] [the x : x is the brightest object in the morning sky & $x = o$] x is a planet.

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

[4] Phosphorus is a planet.

conveys the proposition expressed by

[5] Hesperus, the brightest object in the evening sky, is a planet.

which has the form

[6] [the x : x is the brightest object in the evening sky & $x = o$] x is a planet.

Since [2]\[3] and [5]\[6] express different propositions, [1] and [4] convey different propositions. Following Caplan (2007), let’s call this sort of view ‘Millian descriptivism.’

How is all of this supposed to help with Frege’s puzzle? The idea is that in many cases our intuitions about informativeness and truth-value track features of propositions pragmatically conveyed by utterances of a sentence in a context, rather than of the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence relative to the context. So, says the Millian descriptivist, at least sometimes when we have a pair of sentences which differ only in the substitution of coreferential names but seem to differ in informativeness, these sentences will (in most contexts) convey descriptively enriched propositions which really do differ in informativeness. And at least sometimes when we have a pair of belief ascriptions which differ only in the substitution of coreferential names in the complements of those ascriptions but nonetheless seem to differ in truth-value, these belief ascriptions will (in most contexts) convey ascriptions of belief in distinct propositions, such that these ascriptions really do differ in truth-value.

Nowadays, this may well be the most popular Millian reply to Frege’s puzzle.² But Caplan has given a powerful pair of arguments against this view, which—if we use ‘Fregean descriptivism’ as a name for the view that the meanings of names are given by definite descriptions associated with them by speakers—can be stated as follows:

[A] Millian descriptivism is open to Kripke’s arguments against Fregean descriptivism.

[B] Suppose that the Millian descriptivist can come up with a reply to those arguments. Such a reply will then be available to the Fregean descriptivist as well, in which case Kripke’s arguments against Fregean descriptivism fail, and there’s no reason to be a Millian of any sort.

Consider, for example, Kripke’s modal argument against the descriptivist who identifies the meaning of ‘Hesperus’ with the meaning of ‘the brightest object in the

² The fullest defense of the view is provided in Soames (2002).

evening sky.’ One way to view this argument is as pointing out that [7] expresses a contingent proposition, whereas [8] expresses a necessary proposition:

- [7] If Hesperus exists, then Hesperus is the brightest object visible in the evening sky.
- [8] 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.

Since it follows that there is some world with respect to which the proposition expressed by [8] is true but the proposition expressed by [7] is not, these sentences must express distinct propositions. This sort of example is, as is well-known, one of the main reasons for being a Millian, rather than a Fregean descriptivist, since the simplest versions of Fregean descriptivism seem forced into saying that [7] expresses the same proposition as [8].

But consider what the Millian descriptivist will say about [7]: surely he will say that an utterance of this sentence will pragmatically convey the descriptively enriched proposition expressed by

- [9] 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 [9], like [8], expresses a necessary truth. Since (according to the Millian descriptivist’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 Millian descriptivist seems to be committed to saying that we should have the intuition that [7] is a necessary truth. But we have no such intuition—as Kripke in effect argued against the Fregean descriptivist. So, like the Fregean descriptivist, the Millian descriptivist is committed to thinking that speakers should regard [7] as necessary. But they don’t. (To generate a version of the epistemic argument against Millian descriptivism, just switch out ‘necessary’ in the above for ‘a priori.’)

How should the Millian descriptivist reply? Remember that one of the core ideas behind Millian descriptivism is that 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 in a given context. This raises the question: how do we tell, given a sentence and a context, what the sentence would convey as used in that context? This is, as is well-known, a difficult question, but it is plausible that among the determinants of what is pragmatically conveyed by utterances of sentences are the presuppositions and purposes of parties to the relevant conversation.

One plausible, if only partial, Gricean idea about how this works is that utterances of sentences which express propositions which are trivial or uninformative either in themselves or relative to the presuppositions of the conversation are apt to be used to convey propositions other than those they semantically express—precisely because the propositions they express are already taken for granted by the parties to the conversation, and hence don’t advance the purposes of the

conversational participants. So, for example, if we're discussing the 1996 presidential race between Clinton and Dole, an utterance of

Bill Clinton was a real politician.

will typically be used to convey some proposition more informative than the (in the context) uninformative proposition that Bill Clinton really did run for or hold government office.

This sort of phenomenon illustrates two points: (i) what an utterance of a sentence is used to pragmatically convey depends at least partly on the purposes of participants in the conversation, and (ii) at least in typical cases, assertions of propositions taken for granted by the conversational participants do not advance the purposes of the conversation. Points (i) and (ii) should lead us to expect something else: typically, if p is a proposition which is taken for granted by the parties to a conversation, it will not be possible to use a sentence to pragmatically convey p (unless the sentence semantically expresses p in the relevant context).³

This principle has obvious relevance to Caplan's argument. For that argument to be effective, the Millian descriptivist has to say that we can use sentences like [7] to pragmatically convey the propositions expressed by sentences like [9]. But of course the propositions expressed by sentences like [9] just are trivial, necessary, a priori truths. This feature of these propositions is exactly what qualifies them for use in the version of the modal and epistemic arguments Caplan aims at the Millian descriptivist; but this is also exactly what makes them the sorts of propositions that sentences like [7] can't be used to pragmatically convey.

Of course, some utterances of sentences of the form

If Hesperus exists, then Hesperus ...

might be used to convey the proposition expressed by the corresponding sentence

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

but it does not follow that this will be possible for any way of filling in the ellipsis. Because what propositions an utterance pragmatically conveys is sensitive not just to sentence meaning but also to the background assumptions and purposes of conversational participants (as well as, perhaps, much else) there is no reason to think that pragmatics is compositional in this way.

So what descriptively enriched proposition *would* be conveyed by an utterance of [7]? 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

³ The parenthetical qualification is needed because in at least a large (though difficult to delimit) class of utterances—utterances which are not ironic, sarcastic, etc.—it seems as though the speaker is counted as having conveyed whatever proposition is semantically expressed by the sentence uttered, even if this proposition is uninformative, relative to the assumptions of the conversational participants. But the cases relevant to the evaluation of Millian descriptivism are cases in which a speaker conveys p *without* uttering a sentence which semantically expresses p .

planet in the evening sky. Then you might, in the interests of making no assumptions rejected by your conversational partners, utter [7]. 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 open the Millian descriptivist to any Kripke-style objections.

Suppose that this is how the Millian descriptivist should respond to stage [A] of Caplan's argument. How about stage [B]—the worry that, however the Millian descriptivist responds to [A], that response can be co-opted by the Fregean descriptivist, thus robbing Kripke's arguments against Fregean descriptivism of their force?

I think that this argument as applied to the above suggestion fails, for two reasons. The first (and less decisive) is that even if the Millian descriptivist is committed to the claim that every utterance involving a name pragmatically conveys a proposition which attributes to the referent of the name some descriptive information which is expressed by some description 'the F ', there is no requirement that this description be proper. After all, these propositions don't say that whatever 'is F ' is thus-and-so; they say that whatever 'is F and is identical to o , the referent of the name is thus-and-so. (See [2] and [3] above.) But the orthodox Fregean descriptivist, who thinks that the referent of a name is whatever object uniquely satisfies the description associated with the name, clearly must find uniquely satisfied definite descriptions to express the senses of names which have a referent. So it is far from obvious that it is even open to the Fregean descriptivist to just appeal to 'whatever description the Millian descriptivist uses.'⁴

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—which information this is will depend not just on the speaker, but also the sentence, and the presuppositions and purposes of the relevant conversation. The Fregean can mimic this, but only by making his position extremely implausible. It is very implausible that 'Hesperus' not only varies in meaning between speakers (as Frege and Russell

⁴ The Fregean descriptivist could abandon this sort of 'orthodox Fregeanism' and adopt the propositions expressed by sentences like 'Hesperus is a planet' express propositions like that expressed by

[the x : x is the brightest object in the morning sky & $x = o$] x is a planet.

relative to an assignment of Hesperus to the free variable ' o '. On this view, as with Millian views, the object to which a name refers is a constituent of the propositions expressed by sentences involving the name; unlike Millian views, the name figures in those propositions as part of the content of a definite description. This would avoid the problem discussed above, since on such a view the descriptive information which, along with the object, gives the content of the description, needn't be uniquely satisfied by that object.

However, I doubt that many Fregean descriptivists will be attracted to this sort of view, since many Fregeans object to the idea that objects could be constituents of propositions at all. This is both because of Frege-style incredulity ('Mont Blanc with its snowfields is not itself a component part of the thought that Mont Blanc is more than 4000 m high') and because of worries about conflicts between the idea that objects can be constituents of propositions and certain sorts of actualist and presentist theses. See, for example, Plantinga (1983).

seem to have thought) but also varies for a single speaker, depending the sentence in which the name is used and the conversation in which the sentence is uttered.⁵ The kind of variability in descriptive content which seems perfectly natural at the level of pragmatics seems outlandish when recast as a claim about the semantic contents of names.

So it seems that the Fregean descriptivist can't plausibly mimic the sort of dependence on conversational context which is a natural part of the Millian descriptivist view, and the Millian descriptivist's reply to Caplan's version of the modal and epistemic arguments can't be turned into a Fregean response to Kripke's modal and epistemic arguments.

But one might still wonder whether the Millian descriptivist's strategy of explaining our intuitions about truth conditions might be adapted to the Fregean descriptivist's advantage. One idea along these lines would be for the Fregean descriptivist to explain the fact that sentences like [7] appear to express contingent, a posteriori propositions via a pragmatic theory which is, in a sense, the inverse of the Millian descriptivist's position. The Fregean descriptivist might say that although sentences like [7] do semantically express necessary, a priori propositions, utterances of such sentences typically pragmatically convey the very singular propositions that the Millian takes these sentences to semantically express; our intuitions as to the contingency and a posterioricity of sentences like [7], on this view, are tracking not the propositions that sentences of this sort semantically express, but the propositions that utterances of such sentences typically pragmatically convey.⁶

It might seem that this sort of response misses the mark completely—as Kripke argued, sentences like [7] simply do not seem to express necessary propositions; so what we have to explain is not the fact that we *have* the intuition that sentences like [7] are contingent, but rather the fact that we *do not have* the intuition that they are necessary—and we can hardly do this by appealing to the fact that sentences like this express necessary truths, and, in addition, convey contingent truths. But stating this objection is enough to show why it is unavailable to the Millian. The Millian descriptivist, after all, explains the fact that sentences like

If Hesperus exists, then Hesperus is Phosphorus.

do not seem to be a priori in terms of the fact that many utterances of this sentence would convey a posteriori propositions. So the Millian, given this response to Frege's puzzle, can hardly object in principle to the idea that one can explain the

⁵ Even those who find Frege's view that the meaning of a name varies from occasion to occasion plausible—such as Burge (1979)—don't appear to contemplate the sort of wild context-sensitivity involved in the claim that the contents of names vary in the relevant way. For criticisms of the view that names could exhibit this kind of context-sensitivity, see the arguments against radical contextualism in Cappelen and LePore (2005). For criticisms of the view that Frege endorsed this sort of semantic variance, see May (2006). Thanks for helpful discussion of these points to Ben Caplan.

⁶ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this reply on behalf of the Fregean descriptivist. Caplan also mentions this sort of move as a possible Fregean descriptivist response to the semantic argument (192–194).

absence of an intuition that [7] is necessary via a theory according to which utterances of [7] convey propositions which lack this property.

But, despite the pleasing symmetry of this sort of Fregean alternative to Millian descriptivism—the view is one on which the Millian descriptivist’s pragmatic descriptive enrichment is mirrored by the Fregean descriptivist’s pragmatic descriptive impoverishment—the resulting view is not, I think, very plausible.⁷ Here is one way to see why. On this sort of view, utterances of sentences which express descriptive propositions will typically pragmatically convey singular propositions involving the object which uniquely satisfies the relevant description. If this were true, then we should expect it to be the case that utterances of sentences containing definite descriptions—which really do express descriptive propositions—would typically pragmatically convey singular propositions about the object which satisfies the description. But they don’t.⁸ Typically when I utter a sentence which expresses the proposition that the thing which is such-and-such is thus-and-so, I don’t convey any singular propositions at all about the thing which is such-and-such—in many such cases I don’t even know which object it is, and so am in no position to entertain, let alone convey, such a proposition.⁹

⁷ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this way of putting the point.

⁸ We can, of course, construct cases in which an utterance of a sentence ‘The F is G ’ does pragmatically convey a singular proposition involving the unique satisfier of ‘the F ’—this would just be a case in which the description is used referentially to pick out the object which uniquely satisfies it. (Of course, the usual examples of referential uses of descriptions are ones in which the object which the description is used referentially to pick out does not satisfy the description—as in the example of the referential use of ‘the man drinking a martini’ in Donnellan (1966)—but this is just a dramatic device to emphasize the gap between referential and attributive uses. The cases could just as well be set up so that the relevant object does uniquely satisfy the description.) The point is just that is is not a typical feature of utterances of sentences which express descriptive propositions, as the present defense of Fregean descriptivism would require.

⁹ The Fregean descriptivist might respond to this worry by limiting the scope of the suggestion: perhaps singular propositions are not conveyed by assertoric utterances of *all* sentences which express descriptive propositions, but only by utterances of such sentences which include *names*—this again would be a sort of inversion of the Millian descriptivist’s position, since the Millian’s semantic distinction between names and descriptions would be mirrored by the Fregean descriptivist’s *pragmatic* distinction between names and descriptions.

But this position is an awkward one, for on this sort of view it is not even clear that the distinction between names and descriptions can be drawn in the right way. One might, first, be tempted to draw the distinction on syntactic grounds; but then the problem discussed above re-emerges, since we can surely introduce an abbreviation, like Kaplan’s ‘Newman 1’ (see Kaplan 1968), which has syntactic form of a name but the content of the description it abbreviates. One can, as above, use such an abbreviation in a sentence without being in any position to entertain singular propositions about the object which uniquely satisfies the relevant description.

And there’s obviously no semantic way of drawing the distinction, since the Fregean descriptivist just is someone who identifies the semantic contents of names with the semantic contents of descriptions. So this sort of view amounts to the claim that some sentences which express descriptive propositions convey singular propositions, though others do not, and that there is no systematic way to explain which sentences which express descriptive propositions fall into which category—except that all sentences of the sort that might be used to construct an intuitively convincing instance of Kripke’s modal or epistemic arguments are in the former category. Absent further explanation, this does not seem like a satisfying position.

Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helpful discussion of these points.

So 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.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Thanks to Ben Caplan and an anonymous reviewer for very helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.