

The curious case of the semantic skeptic

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1 A strange skeptic

Suppose someone asked you a strange question: 'How do you know that meaning facts supervene on descriptive facts in such a way as to maximize true beliefs (subject to various constraints) rather than in such a way as to maximize reference to grapes or respect for the Mona Lisa or the number of books that state only falsehoods on their 35th page?'

I think most people would agree that facts about meaning *do* supervene on non-intentional facts about physical stuff and qualia etc. Furthermore, they take themselves to know something about *how* these meaning facts supervene - something that rules out the absurd hypotheses above, and allows them to interpret other people as having certain beliefs in light of their behavior, physical state etc. We take ourselves to have this knowledge even though no one can give a (non trivial) necessary and sufficient condition for meaning or saying that P. I mean, no one can give a necessary and sufficient condition for being a chair either - and who would doubt that the chair facts supervene on the underlying physical etc. facts somehow and that we know how they supervene?

So what (if anything) can we say to the bizzare semantic skeptic just mentioned?

2 A natural answer from a naturalist

If you have (non-reductive!) naturalizing tendencies like myself you will want to say there's something almost incoherent in the question. There are some cases where it just doesn't make sense to suppose that a whole communities practice is wildly wrong. Like, contrast the expressions 'gold' and 'baroque' (in the sense in which art made now can be baroque - provided it's elaborate and convoluted in certain ways). Because "gold" is a natural kind term, which objects are "gold" needn't very closely track the facts about which things people *say* are gold. Some widely used assaying technique may turn out to be a total sham. Or gold might even turn out not to be an element (maybe some conspiracy replaced all samples of gold that were about to be chemically studied with samples of something

else). In contrast, one feels that the facts about what movie plots or rings count as "baroque" couldn't stray anywhere near as far from our communities actual dispositions to use the term. If people used the term slightly differently, the word "baroque" would just come to stand for a slightly different property, baroqueness₂ which better matched common practices of saying that things were "baroque". The fact that we don't take baroqueness to express a natural kind or anything more special than other nearby concepts baroqueness₂ means there's a way in which we can't really get a grip on the skeptic's hypothesis that our whole community is getting the meaning facts radically wrong.

Thus one wants to say something like this to the skeptic: 'Look we just call certain arbitrary very complicated patterns of behavior and other non intentional facts etc. "saying that it's raining" in the way that we just call objects with certain design features "baroque" or furniture of a certain kind "a chair". There's no special meaning relation which different societies could get right or wrong. If we had slightly different meaning attribution practices, we wouldn't be saying false things about meaning, we would be saying true things about some other slightly different but equally good concept like meaning₂. So I can't make sense of the idea that we are radically wrong about meanings in the way that I can't make sense of the idea that we are radically wrong about what's a chair.

Now, in particular, when we look at our meaning attribution practices we see that something like maximizing truth is central to them (and reference to grapes or false beliefs on the 35th page of books). If meaning didn't generally supervene on use in such a way as to maximize truth subject to certain constraints then our meaning attribution practices would be constantly leading us to say and think false things about what people believe. And if meaning really supervened on use in such a way as to maximize reference to grapes our attribution practices would be radically wrong. But as I just mentioned I don't think meaning judgments track the kind of natural kind facts which we could be radically wrong about.'

3 Circularity

There's a problem with the above response though. The problem is that the above response is circular in just the same way as 'I know that the future is like the past because in the past the future was like the past' is a circular response to a skeptic about induction. Our response ultimately amounts to 'We know that use supervenes on meaning in such a way as to (largely) maximize truth because one can't maximize the truth of our meaning attribution practices unless one assigns our word "meaning" to some property which supervenes on use in such a way as to (largely) maximize truth.'

In giving such an answer we are appealing to the skeptic to *make* just the kinds of inferences which he means to be calling into doubt: an inference from regularities about the past to a claim about the future, or an inference from

the fact that nearly all of our assertions about a given thing would express falsehoods if a word meant X to the claim that that word does not mean X. We are giving what Crispin Wright calls a rule-circular justification.

Can one give a better justification? So far as I can tell one can't.

For what it's worth, we *can* say that radical semantic skepticism is more like skepticism about logic than skepticism about the external world. That is, if someone really were a radical semantic skeptic they couldn't say things like "I am a radical semantic skeptic" or "Radical semantic skepticism is warranted" because they would admit that they have no notion of how the meaning of these words is determined. For all they know, these sentences might both express the proposition that everything is self-identical and lime green. So they can't assent to these sentences because they don't know what propositions the sentences express, and hence they don't know what propositions they would be committing themselves to in accepting them. Could they at least think radical skepticism even if they wouldn't take themselves to be justified in accepting any sentences? Perhaps there is some kind of thought antecedent to language which babies and animals engage in, but it is very hard to imagine how one could think about semantic skepticism in this non-verbal way.

Thus it's clearly not a live option for us to *become* radical semantic skeptics. But so far as I can tell there's no way for us to non-circularly answer the radical semantic skeptic's challenge either.