

SOME REMARKS ON MCGINN AND THE MEANING SCEPTIC*

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I

Kripke's meaning sceptic claims that '[t]here can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word', and that 'the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air'.¹ If that is so then the sceptical paradox had better apply not just to those expressions that denote mathematical functions. Colin McGinn has argued convincingly that its application is more general.² Consider, for example, his extension of the paradox to the reference of proper names: 'Kripke' is a name that I have used on only a finite number of occasions, but I think that it has a meaning such that if I were to use it on some future occasion I would be using it correctly if and only if I were to apply it to the man Kripke. Thus if I were to see Kripke at the next meeting of the APA

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¹ Kripke 1982. The quoted passages are from pages 55 and 22 respectively. All future references to this work will be included in the main text.

² McGinn 1984, Chapter 4. All future references to this work will be included in the main text.

I would be correct in using the name, and if I were to run into Putnam instead, I would not be correct in using that same name. But the sceptic will of course ask what facts about me, or my past usage of the name, make it the case that if I am using 'Kripke' now in the same way as I have in the past, then I must apply it to Kripke and not Putnam. The sceptic might suggest that I could be referring to *Kripnam*; where if 'Kripke' refers to Kripnam then it applies to Kripke before time t , and to Putnam thereafter. On this sceptical hypothesis, if I were to run into Kripke at the next meeting of the APA and I were to call him 'Kripke' I would be using that name incorrectly!

The sceptical paradox, reformulated in terms of a doubt about the reference of proper names, clearly resists a straight solution along the lines of those considered by Kripke. The fact that in the past I have always used 'Kripke' to refer to Kripke is compatible with its referring to Kripnam, and the dispositional solution fails, too, because I may well be disposed to mistake Putnam for Kripke after time t , even though I still use 'Kripke' to refer to Kripke (McGinn, p. 142). And even if I were not disposed to make that mistake, still my being disposed to use 'Kripke' to refer to Kripke could no more explain why that is the *correct* way to use 'Kripke' than my being disposed to give the sum as the answer to any problem of the form ' $x + y = ?$ ' explains why that would be the *correct* answer to give to those questions. The relationship between meaning (or reference) and future use is just as much a normative one in the case of proper names (or any other category of word) as it is for mathematical function symbols, and that means that a dispositional account can no more supply a fact that is the fact that I refer to Kripke by 'Kripke' than it could find a fact that is the fact that I meant plus by 'plus'.

McGinn also shows how the sceptical paradox can be extended to sentence connectives (e.g. ‘and’), and as he remarks, it is easy to see how it could be further extended to cover words in other categories (adverbs, demonstratives, etc.). The point I want to make, however, is best illustrated in connection with proper names.

II

McGinn subsequently criticizes Kripke for arbitrarily restricting the facts that he considers in seeking a ‘straight solution’ to the paradox (McGinn, p. 150ff). One form that this complaint takes —a form echoed by others—³ is that the sceptic gives us no grounds for ruling out an ‘irreducibility thesis’ with respect to semantical facts; all the sceptic has shown is that no nonsemantical or nonintentional fact could by itself account for the fact that ‘Kripke’, as I use it, refers to Kripke; but unless the sceptic can give us some reason for thinking that such facts are the only facts there are, it does not follow that there are no facts about meaning or reference. I myself think this is a compelling objection.

However, McGinn not only chides the meaning sceptic for not considering an irreducibility thesis, he also complains that there are facts that might provide a ‘reductive or quasi-reductive’ solution to the paradox that the sceptic fails to consider (McGinn, p. 164). Typically, the sceptic’s demand for a fact that is the fact that I refer to Kripke by ‘Kripke’ takes the form of a request for a fact about my *mental state* (see, for example, Kripke, p. 11). In this form the restriction seems quite reasonable, given that it is plausible to suppose that any fact that could be the fact that I *understand* ‘Kripke’ to refer to Kripke ought to be a fact

³ See, for example, Goldfarb 1985, Loar 1985, McDowell 1992, and Stroud 1996.

about my ‘mental state’. However, on other occasions the sceptic expresses his demand in the form of a request for a fact that is ‘in the head’ of the user of the name (Kripke, p. 82), or for a fact ‘about an individual’ (ibid., p. 39). Because of this it has seemed natural to some commentators to charge the sceptic with ignoring ‘externalist’ or ‘causal’ theories of meaning.⁴ To be fair to the sceptic, in at least one place he claims that there are no semantical facts ‘in either the “internal” or the “external” world’ (Kripke, p. 69). Kripke does not indicate what facts he has in mind here by ‘external’; at any rate, he does not explicitly consider the sort of facts that those who believe that meanings ‘just ain’t in the head’ take to constitute facts of meaning.

How damaging this charge is depends on the kind of ‘externalist’ account envisaged. The account envisaged by McGinn is Kripke’s own, earlier, ‘causal theory of reference’.⁵ But (and this is my main point) I do not think that this account, as outlined by McGinn at any rate, can

⁴ Goldfarb rehearses this charge on behalf of ‘reductionists’ (Goldfarb 1985, p. 478 n. 13). Paul Boghossian has replied that the charge is unfair because ‘a causal theory of meaning is simply one species of a dispositional theory of meaning, an account that is, of course, extensively discussed by Kripke’ (see Boghossian 1989, p. 527). By a ‘causal theory of meaning’ Boghossian has in mind what he calls ‘conceptual role’ and ‘causal/informational’ theories, and I agree that such theories are, at bottom, dispositional accounts. However, there are other kinds of ‘causal’ theory that do not seem to me to be dispositional. In particular, Kripke’s own, earlier, brief sketch of how the reference of a proper name is fixed depends not on the truth of any counterfactuals, but on the actual ‘causal’ relations that obtain between a speaker’s use of a name and its referent. It may be something like this kind of ‘theory’ that Goldfarb had in mind. Such accounts, however, would seem to fall foul of other arguments of the meaning sceptic (see n. 6, below). And if this is so, then it would of course be unjust to criticize Kripke (or the meaning sceptic) for omitting to consider ‘causal accounts’; the most that could be said against Kripke is that his discussion is in this respect somewhat compressed.

⁵ Kripke 1980.

provide a ‘reductive or quasi-reductive’ solution to the paradox.

According to McGinn, this ‘theory’ amounts to saying that there is some relation, R , that is what the reference relation consists in, and that relation is ‘some kind of *causal* relation’ (McGinn 1984, p. 165, his emphasis). Thus if my use of ‘Kripke’ bears R to Kripke, then my use is correct, and in this way the causal relation, R , is supposed (somehow!) to provide a basis for the normativity of reference. McGinn’s conjecture is that if neither my past usage of ‘Kripke’, nor my being disposed to apply the name to Kripke, nor any rule ‘engraved on my mind as on a slate’ (Kripke, p. 15) telling me how to apply the name, could constitute the fact that, as I use it, ‘Kripke’ refers to Kripke, then the fact (if it is a fact) that my use of ‘Kripke’ bears R to Kripke might constitute the elusive semantical fact. If this were true then, at least in the case of proper names, an extrinsic or relational fact would succeed —where intrinsic facts had failed— in providing a straight ‘reductive or quasi-reductive’ solution to the sceptical paradox.

McGinn is primarily interested in the reductionist spirit of this proposal, not its accuracy as a reading of Kripke, so let us pass over the discrepancies between the two.⁶ Now

⁶ McGinn of course is well aware that in Kripke’s brief account the speaker’s *intentions* play a vital role in the ‘causal chain of communication’ that stretches back from the speaker’s use of ‘Kripke’ to the referent himself. For if reference is to succeed, then at each link in that chain the new user of the name must *intend* to use it with the same reference as the person from whom he got the name (Kripke 1980, p. 96). To take Kripke’s own example, if I hear the name ‘Napoleon’ from others who use it to refer to the French Emperor, but I use it to name my pet aardvark, then my use of this name does not make me refer to the French Emperor, even though it does mean that there will still be a causal connection of some sort between my use of ‘Napoleon’ and the man himself. So on Kripke’s ‘causal chain’

according to McGinn, this ‘causal theory’ is not susceptible to the sceptical paradox. This is because he supposes that only Kripke lies at the origin of the causal chain that terminates in my use of ‘Kripke’, and if that is so then my use will be correct if and only if I use ‘Kripke’ to talk about Kripke. We may suppose, or so McGinn says, that the sceptic’s nonstandard extension does not originate any such causal chain, and so if after time t I were to call

picture of reference, in order to specify the sort of connection that must obtain between a name and an object for reference to occur, it is vital that we bring in the name-user’s intentions. Thus, as Kripke himself acknowledges (1980, pp. 94–97), he never intended that his ‘picture’ of how the reference of a proper name is fixed should amount to any sort of reduction of reference to some nonsemantical or nonintentional relation.

It may be for this reason that Kripke himself never bothered explicitly to consider whether his own ‘account’ could provide a straight solution to the paradox. Making use as it does of intentional notions, it is obvious how it too would succumb to the paradox. Just as the sceptic demanded to know what my understanding ‘plus’ to mean plus consisted in, so he will demand to know what my *intention* to use a name with the same reference as the person from whom I got it consists in —the sceptic thinks that here too we are obliged to say something about what nonintentional facts ‘underlie’ my having this intention. And if, as he thinks we must, we fall back on some feeling, or some resolution ‘engraved on my mind as on a slate’ (Kripke, p. 15) then the sceptic will simply ask: What fact about me prevents it from being the case that this feeling is a feeling of *schmintending*, or that by ‘intend’ I could mean *schmintend* —where to *schmintend* to use ‘Kripke’ as others use it is to use it as they do before t , and to use it to refer to Putnam thereafter. If —as seems true— every nonintentional fact about me that we might suppose could constitute the fact that I use ‘intend’ to mean intend is also compatible with my using it to mean *schmintend*, then it seems we are right back where we started from.

I should add that I do not mean this as a criticism of Kripke’s ‘picture’ of reference. The sceptic’s arguments would undermine that ‘picture’ only if he could find some independent reason for challenging the existence of intentional facts and, as I have already said, he has not done this.

Putnam ‘Kripke’ I would be making a mistake. Thus if McGinn is right, in this case the sceptic’s nonstandard extension is *not* compatible with all of the facts surrounding my use of ‘Kripke’, and because the sceptic’s hypothesis is incompatible with those facts the sceptical paradox cannot be generated; it cannot be generated because the nonstandard extension for the name devised by the sceptic will not be appropriately causally related to my use of ‘Kripke’ (McGinn, p. 165).

But I don’t understand why McGinn thinks that it won’t be so related. In fact, the very example that he gives seems to me to show that my use of ‘Kripke’ *does* bear R to the nonstandard extension contrived by the sceptic. The reason that McGinn gives for saying that the nonstandard extension cannot figure as the causal origin of my use of ‘Kripke’ is that *Putnam* does not stand in the relation R to that use (ibid.). Now we may grant McGinn that *Putnam* is ‘causally isolated’ from my present use of ‘Kripke’, but *Kripnam* is *not*. *Kripnam* is not ‘causally isolated’ from my use of ‘Kripke’ because before t , whatever bears R to Kripke bears R to Kripnam (and the fact that after t it is not true that whatever bears R to Kripke also bears R to Kripnam is irrelevant); and so if all it takes for my use of ‘Kripke’ to refer is for it to bear R to someone, then as far as that causal fact is concerned, by my present use of ‘Kripke’ I may be referring to Kripnam. It seems that even if we consider this particular extrinsic fact about my use of ‘Kripke’ there is still going to be room for the sceptic to generate his paradox. And if that is so, then that external, causal fact must fall short of the fact that I refer to Kripke by my use of ‘Kripke’.

Some ‘externalists’ will be eager to point out that the ‘causal theory of reference’ considered by McGinn is excessively crude; an obvious candidate for a more sophisticated ‘externalist’ account is the kind of ‘informational’ theory

considered by Jerry Fodor.⁷ I suspect that any ‘externalist’ account, if it is part of a ‘reductive or quasi-reductive’ account of meaning, will fail to solve the paradox; but spelling out exactly how such accounts would fail is not easy. The matter deserves further attention.

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⁷ Fodor 1990.

RESUMEN

Como muchos otros comentaristas, tomo los argumentos del escéptico del significado de Kripke para plantear un reto extraordinario al proyecto de tratar de explicar o dar cuenta de una intencionalidad o un significado en términos no intencionales o no semánticos. Colin McGinn ha conjeturado que una “explicación causal” de la referencia de los nombres propios (aproximadamente del tipo del primer bosquejo que el mismo Kripke presenta en *El nombrar y la necesidad*) puede evadir la paradoja del escéptico del significado y así dar cuenta, en términos no intencionales, de en qué consiste la referencia. En este trabajo argumento que el tipo de “explicación causal” que McGinn concibe no puede evadir el argumento del escéptico del significado.

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