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Experimental Philosophical Semantics and the Real Reference of 'Gödel'

The first purpose of this talk is to defend experimental philosophical semantics, and to resolve "the puzzle of experimental philosophy" for the case of semantics. The second is to argue for a form of intentional irrealism – for the view that semantic judgments are constitutive of semantic facts. The arguments to be suggested for these views are interrelated.

Recall Kripke's Gödel/Schmidt example. Can Kripke's claim that 'Gödel' in this example refers to Gödel be justified by an appeal to a universal intuition? Machery, Mallon, Nichols and Stich ("MMNS") took the results of the surveys they conducted to reveal a cultural divergence in semantic intuitions and thus to suggest a negative answer to this question. So whose intuitions are to count? The philosophers' "armchair" methodology of theorizing about reference is put in jeopardy.

Some critics of MMNS argue that we *should* defer to philosophers' judgments in such cases. Kirk Ludwig argues that philosophers are more competent to consider the complex methodological and conceptual issues pertaining to semantics. Upon realizing that Ludwig's claim does not pertain to "raw" (i.e., unsupported) intuitions but to theoretical considerations, it appears that a crucial premise is missing from his reasoning, namely that theoretical considerations of the kind philosophers engage with that do not involve raw intuitions suffice to settle issues of reference. Call this claim "TCS". Rejecting TCS turns out to be a necessary and (under some assumptions to be defended) sufficient condition for the *possibility* of experimental semantics. I will argue that TCS is false. First, I will show that Kripkean considerations for the claim that 'Gödel' refers to Gödel do not settle the issue – they presuppose schemes of semantic interpretation at different levels of specificity; then I will generalize the argument, and show that no theoretical considerations can settle issues of reference without presupposing some such scheme. The argument is based on the idea that representations cannot contain information about their intentional functions.

Next, I will argue (against, e.g., Devitt) that philosophers' raw semantic intuitions have no advantage over those of laypersons. Given these two claims, if the universality assumption regarding semantic intuitions is undermined (by empirical investigation), armchair philosophy of reference is in trouble.

This in itself justifies MMNS' claims that experimental semantics is important. But I will argue, further, that the specific findings of the semantic surveys in question – and not only whether they attest for cultural variability – are significant for this project. Given those two

claims and the falsity of the universality assumption, the only viable alternative is to appeal to raw semantic intuitions regarding the "predictions" of the relevant theories in various cases; and the raw intuitions of all groups of competent speakers are equally relevant. More precisely, this holds true if ascriptions of reference are meaningful and have truth conditions.

However, such an appeal to semantic intuitions seems problematic. Once the universality assumption is proven false, it isn't clear on what grounds we can attribute to such intuitions any evidential value with respect to reference determination. This appeal is threatened by the following puzzle: "How on earth could information about the statistical distribution of intuitions ever give us reason to accept or reject a particular philosophical view?" (Knobe and Nichols).

This brings me to the second part of this talk. It suggests a (transcendental) argument to the effect that the view that underlies experimental semantics, namely that theoretical considerations do not settle questions of reference determination, leads to a form of intentional irrealism according to which semantic judgments are constitutive of semantic facts. The gist of the argument is this. In the absence of decisive considerations, there is no test for the truth of semantic judgments (i.e., ascriptions of reference) other than that of coherence with the practice of such judgments. Thus, semantic facts that are supposed to be out there, independent of this practice, are unknowable. Such facts also make no difference to first-order linguistic use and to second-order linguistic use (i.e. to ascriptions of reference), and have no explanatory power. Establishing these points is just a short step from establishing that there are no such facts; at any rate, there is no reason to postulate them.

On the approach that emerges, reference is relative to a practice of ascriptions of reference. In abstraction from such a practice, there is no answer to questions such as "To whom does 'Gödel' (really) refer?" The criterion for the truth of ascriptions of reference is coherence with the practice. It is the practice that constitutes semantic facts. On this view, ascriptions of reference do have truth-conditions, yet their truth-conditions are practice-dependent. The view that the practice of semantic intuitions is constitutive of semantic facts legitimizes the assumption that ascriptions of reference have truth conditions, and (trivially) vindicates the reliance on surveys of semantic intuitions and resolves the puzzle of experimental philosophy for the case of semantics.