Necessary A Posteriori Identity Truths: Fregeanism Beats Direct Reference Theory

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Abstract

I argue that Fregeanism with respect to proper names – the view that modes of presentation are relevant to the contents of proper names – is able to account for the thesis that there are necessarily true a posteriori identity propositions such as the one expressed in "Hesperus is identical with Phosphorus", whereas the Direct Reference Theory – according to which the semantic function of certain expressions, e.g., proper names, is only to pick out an object (referent) – is able to deal with only their necessary truth. Thus, at least in so far as necessarily true a posteriori identity propositions are concerned, Fregeanism should be preferred to the Direct Reference Theory.

Keywords: Fregeanism, Direct Reference Theory, Necessary identity, Aposteriority

1. Introduction

Let's take Fregeanism, as opposed to the Direct Reference Theory (DRT), to be the view that modes of presentation (MOPs) are relevant to the contents of proper names. Fregeanism gives a natural answer to the question, why true empirical identity propositions such as *that Hesperus is identical*

with Phosphorus are a posteriori, i.e., not verifiable (nor falsifiable) without an appeal to experience: different MOPs of one and the same planet Venus are associated with 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus'. I shall argue that DRT, at least in its pure, unmanipulated form cannot account for the aposteriority of the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus.

DRT has a straightforward explanation for the necessity of "Hesperus is Phosphorus": because the semantic function of a proper name is only to pick out an object (referent), the object picked out by both 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' is the same with respect to every possible world. I shall argue, against the received view, that Fregeanism can easily allow the rigidity of names as well, and, accordingly, has the resources to accommodate the necessity of identity truths such as the one expressed in "Hesperus is Phosphorus".[1]

So, the claim to be argued for in this paper is that Fregeanism can account for both the necessary truth and aposteriority of true identity propositions such as *that Hesperus is Phosphorus*, whereas DRT is really able to deal with only the necessary truth of them. Thus, at least in so far as the thesis that there are necessary a posteriori identity truths is at issue, Fregeanism is to be preferred to DRT.

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[1] Such acceptance of rigidity combined with rejection of direct reference is made possible by the simple fact that these concepts differ: rigidity means reference to the same referent in every possible world (in which that referent exists), whereas direct reference means reference without a mediation of the content – 'the square of 2', for example, is rigid but not directly referential. (See, in particular, Kaplan 1989, 492-97.) Because rigidity does not entail direct referentiality, incorporating the former is open for Fregeanism, even though it by its very nature excludes the latter.

2. A Fregean account of necessary identity truths

It is commonly taken for granted that Fregeanism is committed to the contingency of true identity propositions expressed with proper names. Robert Stalnaker (2006, 295), for example, states bluntly:

> On the Fregean view, the thought expressed, in the actual world, by the statement "Hesperus is Phosphorus" is a contingent proposition that is false in the possible world [of the sort to be described shortly], and it is the very same proposition as the one that would be expressed by someone in that counterfactual possible world who said "Hesperus is Phosphorus" there.

The picture imposed on Fregeanism is as follows. In the actual world both 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' refer to Venus. In some other possible world, let's call it Mars-world, in which Mars appears in mornings where Venus actually appears, thinkers, while referring by 'Hesperus' to Venus and by 'Phosphorus' to Mars, might be in exactly similar epistemic position as are users of 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' in the actual world. Then, since Fregean MOPs arise from the epistemic positions the thinkers are situated in, the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus must, according to Fregeanism, be contingent because it is true in the actual world and false in Mars-world.

It should be kept in mind that according to DRT only referents of proper names are relevant to propositional contents, whereas Fregeanism, understood as a theory opposing DRT, implies that more than just referents, viz. MOPs, are involved in the contents of proper

names. In itself, this does not obligate Fregeans to accept the picture described. It is open for Fregeanism to confine itself to a much thinner conception of MOPs than the one assumed in that picture.

It is instructive to see how Saul Kripke deals with such a Mars-world case. By considering

(1) Aristotle was fond of dogs,

Kripke (1980, 7-10) rightly dismisses the claim "that the simple fact that two people [e.g., the Philosopher and Onassis] can have the same name refutes the rigidity thesis" (p. 7). In replying to this erroneous claim, Kripke says things like: "I perforce assumed a particular reading for (1)" (p. 8); (1) is given a "fixed understanding" (p. 9); (1) "must be taken to express a single proposition" (p. 9, italics removed). Concerning Mars-world like thought-experiments, Kripke (1980, 109n51; see also 102-5) explains:

Recall that we describe the situation in our language, not the language that the people in that situation would have used. Hence we must use the terms 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' with the same reference as in the actual world. The fact that people in that situation might or might not have used these names for different planets is irrelevant.

So, the ultimate reason why rigidity is not threatened by the Mars-world case is that the Mars-world name 'Phosphorus', referring to Mars, is not *our* name 'Phosphorus': our name

refs to Venus even with respect to Mars-world. This view is entirely natural: equiform (i.e., orthographically or phonologically the same) names of different things must be regarded as *semantically* distinct (see, for instance, Kripke 1980, 8; Kaplan 1989, 562; Bealer 2002, 100n34) – so, 'Phosphorus' as used in Mars-world is semantically distinct from our 'Phosphorus'.

Now, this approach is open for Fregeanism as well: The Mars-world name 'Phosphorus' refers to Mars and not to Venus, and the Mars-world sentence "Hesperus is Phosphorus" is about both Venus and Mars and is thus irrelevant to the modal status of *our* "Hesperus is Phosphorus", which is only about Venus. What is more, Fregean MOPs may be seen as arising from what Kripke in the passages provided above calls "particular reading" and "fixed understanding". I suggest that to "understand" that the pattern 'Aristotle' in (1) is *this symbol* and *not any other symbol* amounts to attaching a MOP to a certain object and not any other object. To take (1) – a pattern such as the one displayed in (1) – to express a certain proposition (say, about the Philosopher) and not any other proposition (like the one about Onassis) is, among other things, to adopt a "fixed understanding" or "particular reading" of 'Aristotle' in (1), or, to take it as a MOP or a "way of being given" (*Art des Gegebenseins* in Frege's own words) of a certain object, or, as we may also say, to use it with a certain extra-referential content. To adopt a "particular reading" of a name is to attach an extra-referential *semantic* feature to it, which means that (for example) patterns 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' – in relevant uses – are semantically distinct despite being co-referential. Hence, it is not the case that the semantical content of a proper name is only the referent. Reflection on communication is here instructive: What matters to the communicating parties, to the success

of communication, is that these parties are using the name in the same "understanding" – that they are using the same symbol. The "particular reading" of 'Phosphorus' by somebody, M, in the Mars-world would not be the same as ours in the actual world – if we could be in "transworld contact" with M, we would not really communicate with her with 'Phosphorus'.[2]

Fregeanism may be seen as advocating only such a thin conception of MOPs, rather than that thicker notion the picture presented above is about. This *Soft Fregeanism*[3] avoids the familiar fatal semantic and epistemic problems of *Hard Fregeanism* (i.e., the received view described above by means of Mars-world), such as the one revealed by the argument from truth conditions (Kripke 1980, 6-14), and, furthermore, is capable of embracing the causal chain view of names.[4] [5]

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[2] Note that this is *not* a metalinguistic view – I am not appealing to the fact that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus', for example, are distinct patterns.

[3] Or a modest beginning of Soft Fregeanism, articulated only for ordinary proper names in this paper.

[4] Here, I am indebted to X (personal communication). See Author's Paper for a fuller exposition of this conception of MOPs as arising from symbolhood.

[5] An anonymous referee of this journal raised a question whether, according to Soft Fregeanism, in an imagined world W which differs from the actual world *only* in that "the statement 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' is not known" in W, the true proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus is a posteriori or a priori for the inhabitants of W. My reply is that *our* proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus is a posteriori even with respect to W – the inhabitants of W do not have access to that proposition (so to speak) but were they to give

3. DRT's trouble with aposteriority

The following argument seems highly problematic for DRT:[6]

(P1) If DRT is true, then a proper name's contribution to the propositional content is only the referent.

(P2) If a proper name's contribution to the propositional content is only the referent, then the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus is the same as the proposition that Hesperus is Hesperus.

(P3) It is true of the proposition that Hesperus is Hesperus that it is not a posteriori.

(P4) If x=y, then all the same truths hold about x and y. (Leibniz's Law.)

Therefore,

(C) if DRT is true, it is true of the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus that it is not a posteriori.[7]

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these both names to Venus (in relevant circumstances), they would gain that access.

[6] One of the earliest formulations of this argument appears in Fitch 1976. See also, for instance, Soames 2002, 5-6 & 236.

[7] Utilizing lambda abstraction, the argument in a nutshell is that assuming DRT, $\lambda x(\sim Ax)q$ follows by Leibniz's Law from $p=q$ and $\lambda x(\sim Ax)p$, where p is the proposition that Hesperus is Hesperus and q the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus and 'A' stands for aposteriority. Note that 'y' is in $\lambda x(\sim Ax)y$ in an *extensional* position, which means that intensional fallacy is not committed in this argument.

In this argument, the premise (P4) is irreproachable, (P3) seems incontestable, and (P1) must

be accepted by proponents of DRT. Premise (P2) appears to hold as well.[8] The conclusion

(C) seems to refute DRT, or at least seems to prove that DRT cannot account for the

aposteriority of true identity statements with distinct proper names.[9]

Gregory W. Fitch (2004, 110-13) suggests, in the interest of resisting (something like) the

given argument, that we should consider the metaphysical and epistemological status of

    (2) "Hesperus = Phosphorus" expresses a truth in our language,

where "Hesperus = Phosphorus" represents, not a proposition but a *statement*, or "a

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[8] Some advocates of DRT have ventured to deny (P2), arguing, somewhat desperately, that

that Hesperus is Hesperus is, whereas *that Hesperus is Phosphorus* is not, of the logical form

that Hesperus is self-identical (see, for instance, Salmon 1986b, 409-22, and Soames 1990,

204-11). One problem with this is that it invalidates the evident inference, by *salva veritate*

substitution, from "Hesperus is Hesperus" to "Hesperus is Phosphorus". (Cf. the next Note.)

[9] Some hardline direct reference theorists, for example Nathan Salmon (1986, 137-38) and

Scott Soames (2002, 237 & 278) have held that the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus

is, indeed, not a posteriori but a priori. However, the Salmon-Soames option is irrelevant with

respect to the present paper, which concerns the evaluation of competing theories *on the*

presupposition that the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus and the like *are* necessarily

true but a posteriori.

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completed interpreted sentence". Fitch argues that (2) is necessarily true but a posteriori, and is distinct from the necessarily true a priori "'Hesperus = Hesperus' expresses a truth on our language", which would vitiate the given argument (P1)-(P4/(C).[10]

However, there is a fatal problem with this suggestion, as pointed out by Joseph LaPorte (2016, Section 3.1): If (2)'s being a posteriori amounts to the fact empirical inquiry is required for the determination of what is the truth value of "Hesperus = Phosphorus" *as it is used in English* (with the relevant interpretation of the names in question), then all necessary statements are a posteriori. For example, the statement "Equilateral triangles are equiangular" – surely, an apriori truth – comes out as posteriori, if the relevant issue is to determine how the terms in that sentence are used by English speakers.

According to two-dimensional approaches to semantics, in turn, the one and the same *C-proposition*[11] expressed by both "Hesperus is Phosphorus" and "Hesperus is Hesperus" is necessary and a priori, whereas the *A-proposition*[12] expressed by "Hesperus is Phosphorus" in effect goes along with how propositions are individuated in Hard Fregeanism, and is a posteriori and contingent: in Mars-world, for example, this A-proposition is false. As

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[10] I thank an anonymous referee of this journal for pointing out the need to address this suggestion.

[11] Also known as counterfactual proposition, subjunctive proposition, secondary proposition, and 2-proposition.

[12] Also known as actual-proposition, epistemic proposition, primary proposition, and 1-proposition.

indicated above, I reject Hard Fregeanism and, by the same token, this two-dimensional approach: I think we will do better if we stick to just one proposition – that of Soft Fregeanism – *that Hesperus is Phosphorus* and hold outright that the denizens of Mars-world express by "Hesperus is Phosphorus" something different.[13] Furthermore, it seems that this two-dimensional solution is, after all, incapable of giving an account of the thesis that there are necessarily true a posteriori identity propositions (and, apparently, it does not even try to do this): On this solution, the item that is held to be necessary (the C-proposition) is not the item that is regarded as a posteriori (the A-proposition). Kai-Yee Wong (2006, 316-19) calls this the *dual-proposition problem*. (Tichy (1983) is often referred to as the paper containing the first formulation of this problem.)

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[13] In some versions (e.g., Stalnaker 1978), two-dimensionalism is explicitly fleshed out by saying that an *utterance* of "Hesperus is Phosphorus" expresses different propositions in different circumstances (for instance, a false proposition in Mars-world). However, as already indicated above, an utterance of the pattern "Hesperus is Phosphorus" in, say, Mars-world is not an utterance of what is semantically *our* sentence "Hesperus is Phosphorus".

Cf. Kripke (1980, 104): "we do not know a priori that Hesperus is Phosphorus [...] because we could have evidence qualitatively indistinguishable from the evidence we have and determine the reference of the two names by the positions of two planets in the sky, without the planets being the same." (See also ibid., 142-44.) Again, to my mind this is an incorrect way to put things, for such qualitatively indistinguishable evidence does not really concern the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus, which involves only Venus – in Mars-world such evidence is about Venus and Mars, and not about Venus only.

Many proponents of DRT, whether two-dimensionalists or not,[14] have tried to solve the difficulties DRT has with belief ascriptions and aposteriority (including the dual-proposition problem) by resorting to something like MOPs of propositions. For example, Salmon (1986, 109-27) speaks of different "guises of", "ways of taking", and "ways of being familiar with" a proposition. In a similar vein, Wong (2006, 319-26) and others have suggested that apriority should be understood in a relative manner, not applying absolutely to a proposition but only in relation to something like a MOP of a proposition. The solution to the dual-proposition problem would then be that the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus is a posteriori relative to some MOPs but a priori relative to others. For example, in Wong's (2006, 321) construal, this proposition is a posteriori relative to a sentence that expresses a contingent A-proposition, e.g., just "Hesperus is Phosphorus", but a priori relative to "Hesperus is Hesperus", which expresses a necessary A-proposition.[15]

This sort of quibbling about MOPs of propositions (i) is complicated, (ii) appears as an ad hoc expansion with the sole purpose of saving DRT from highly counterintuitive consequences, (iii) arguably betrays the very idea of DRT (see, for instance, Wagner 1986, 445-46), and (iv) contravenes the entirely natural, traditional view that it is just propositions (in the absolute sense) that are a priori or a posteriori. It is much simpler and more plausible

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[14] Two-dimensional approach is rejected by some prominent advocates of DRT, most notably, perhaps, by Soames (2005).

[15] Note that my Soft Fregeanism is *not* a version of a sophisticated DRT. The defining feature of DRT is that nothing like MOPs belong to contents of proper names (and other directly referential terms).

to adhere to the tradition – I mean *pre*-Fregean tradition – according to which the identities of propositions are determined by cognitions (propositional attitudes, especially beliefs) that may be taken towards them: Imagine that you cognize an item C and an item D, both concerning the empirical world and having (at least potentially) a truth-value. C strikes you as self-evidently true, whereas you realize that to verify (or falsify) D requires empirical investigation. That is, C is a priori and D is a posteriori, and C and D are distinct items. An example of C is what is cognized via "Hesperus is Hesperus" (i.e., the proposition that Hesperus is Hesperus) and an example of D is what is cognized via "Hesperus is Phosphorus" (the proposition that Hesperus is Phosphorus). The claim that what is "really essential" in connection with these cognized items is one and the same MOPless proposition is just an unnatural fabrication of DRT – why should we transform our traditional and natural notion of apriority on the basis of DRT?

In contrast, Soft Fregeanism, as explained in this paper, respects the tradition, explains the a posteriori status of the true propositions such as *that Hesperus is Phosphorus*, and accommodates the relatively recent but plausible claim that such propositions are necessarily true.

4. Conclusion

(i) There are necessarily true a posteriori identity propositions.

(ii) A theory that can (naturally, without resorting to ad hoc expansions) accommodate both

the necessary truth and aposteriority of such propositions is better than a theory that cannot.

(iii) Fregeanism can (without resorting to ad hoc expansions) explain the necessary truth of such propositions.

(iv) Fregeanism can (without resorting to ad hoc expansions) account for the aposteriority of such propositions, whereas DRT cannot.

Therefore,

(v) Fregeanism is a better theory than DRT (at least in so far as the thesis that there are necessarily true a posteriori identity propositions is concerned).[16]

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