

How To Parry A Millian Heir

Those who are without *Sinn* may not have thrown the first stone -- perhaps it is fair to attribute this action to Frege -- but they have certainly been making up for lost time in recent years. Nathan Salmon's "A Millian Heir Rejects The Wages Of *Sinn*" constitutes one of the weightiest barrages to have been directed against neo-Fregeans. While not going so far as to suggest that the wages of *Sinn* are death, Salmon here undertakes to show that all the linguistic evidence which can be assembled in connection with propositional attitude ascriptions speaks in favour of neo-Russellianism and against neo-Fregeanism. I do not find his arguments for this claim persuasive; I reply to them on behalf of neo-Fregeans in what follows. Although tempted by the Catholic doctrine that no (adequate) theory is without *Sinn*, I make no attempt to defend this claim here: my present purpose is purely defensive (hence the title).

I

I begin with a note about terminology. Salmon provides some interesting discussion of the use of the labels "neo-Fregean" ["Fregean"] and "neo-Russellian" ["Russellian", "Millian"], but I do not think that his treatment is even-handed. On the one hand, he is prepared to apply the label "neo-Russellian" ["Russellian", "Millian"] to any theory which is committed to the claim that the information value of a simple

singular term is identical with its referent. (235) On the other hand, he refuses to apply the label “neo-Fregean” to theories which are committed to the denial of the claim, that the information value of simple singular term is identical with its referent, in cases in which there is too much other departure from the views which Frege actually held. (246) Salmon’s views -- by his own admission -- depart enormously from the views which Russell and Mill actually held, though they do coincide on the claim which he takes to be criterial for the application of the label “neo-Russellian” [“Russellian”, “Millian”]. Clearly, then, there is a double standard operating here. Of course, nothing important follows -- we are all free to stipulate uses for labels -- but my own preference is to use the label “neo-Russellian” for theories which are committed to the claim that the semantic content of a simple singular term is identical with its referent, and the label “neo-Fregean” for theories which are committed to the claim that the semantic content of a simple singular term (sometimes) involves something more than (or other than) its referent. Others might prefer to invent new names which make no mention of either Frege or Russell -- perhaps “directly referential” and “mode-of-presentational”. However, as Salmon notes, the correspondence between Frege and Russell in 1904 provides good reason for thinking that dispute about the claim which I make criterial for the distinction between neo-Fregeans and neo-Russellians was actually a “primary bone of contention” between Frege and Russell.

Salmon's paper has five sections, each with a different focus. Two sections are devoted to replies to what Salmon takes to be the two strongest arguments for neo-Fregeanism: (i) the argument about informativeness; and (ii) the argument about substitutivity in attitude contexts. Two sections are devoted to defences of what (I assume) Salmon takes to be the two strongest arguments for neo-Russellianism: (iii) the argument about individual variables; and (iv) the argument about the irrelevance of what we actually say. The final section provides an assessment of the claim that neo-Russellianism and neo-Fregeanism are "notational variants". I shall discuss each of these sections in turn.

1. The Argument About Informativeness

Salmon suggests that the argument about informativeness should be formulated as follows:

1. If a declarative sentence S has the very same cognitive information content as a declarative sentence S' , then S is informative iff S' is. (Frege's Law)
2. If p and q are propositions that involve the very same constituents arranged in the very same way, then p and q are the very same proposition.
(Compositionality for propositions)
3. 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' is informative; 'Hesperus is Hesperus' is not.
(Premise; apparently supported by simple observation)

4. Therefore: The names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' differ in information value.
(From 1, 2 and 3)
5. 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are co-referential. (Premise; known to be true)
6. Therefore: The information value of the names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' is not their (common) referent. (From 4, 5)
7. Therefore: It is not the case that the contribution made by an ordinary proper name or other simple singular term to securing the information content of, or the proposition expressed by, declarative sentences (with respect to a given possible context of use) in which the term occurs (outside of the scope of non-extensional operators such as quotation marks) is just the referent of the term, or the bearer of the name (with respect to that context of use). (From 6)

He then suggests that this argument cannot be any good: if it were, then precisely parallel arguments could be used to draw absurd conclusions, viz.: (i) that the information content of 'elm' and 'beech' is not their conceptual content; and (ii) that perfect synonyms like 'ketchup' and 'catsup' can differ in their information content.

I think that there are problems with the details of the parallel arguments which Salmon offers. However, I don't wish to argue about them here. Given what I take to be the crucial issue which divides neo-Fregeans and neo-Russellians, discussion of sentences like 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' and 'Ketchup is catsup' is simply beside the main point. The characteristic claim of neo-Fregeans is sustained if it is true that the semantic content of a simple singular term involves something more than (or other than) its referent when that term is embedded in attitude contexts. Moreover, all neo-Fregeans will agree that the semantic content of a simple singular term involves

something more than (or other than) its referent when that term is embedded in attitude contexts. Some neo-Fregeans may think that that the semantic content of a simple singular term involves something more than (or other than) its referent even when the occurrences of the term are “naked” (as in ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’). But neo-Fregeans are allowed to hold that that the semantic content of a simple singular term is identical with its referent if the singular term in question has a “naked” occurrence. I myself favour this option; so I have no wish to press the argument about informativeness against Salmon. On the contrary, I simply endorse his response: ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ do not differ in semantic content -- they make exactly the same contribution to truth-conditions -- in the sentence ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’. Moreover, the difference in “information value” is to be given a purely pragmatic explanation: those who do not know that the words ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ refer to the same object can learn that they do thus co-refer *via* exposure to an appropriate tokening of the sentence ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’, etc.

2. The Argument About Substitutivity In Attitude Contexts

Salmon suggests that the argument about substitutivity in attitude contexts should be formulated as follows:

1. If two declarative sentences S and S’ differ only in the occurrence of names which have exactly the same semantic content -- where these occurrences lie

outside the scope of non-extensional operators such as quotation marks -- then S and S' have the same semantic content (and hence the same truth-value).

2. If p and q are propositions that involve the very same constituents arranged in the very same way, then p and q are the very same proposition.

(Compositionality for propositions)

3. 'A believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus' and 'A believes that Hesperus is Hesperus' can differ in truth-value. (Premise; apparently supported by simple observation)

4. Therefore: The names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' differ in semantic content.

(From 1, 2 and 3)

5. 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are co-referential. (Premise; known to be true)

6. Therefore: The semantic content of the names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' is not their (common) referent. (From 4, 5)

7. Therefore: It is not the case that the contribution made by an ordinary proper name or other simple singular term to securing the semantic content of, or the proposition expressed by, declarative sentences (with respect to a given possible context of use) in which the term occurs (outside of the scope of non-extensional operators such as quotation marks) is just the referent of the term, or the bearer of the name (with respect to that context of use). (From 6)

He then claims: (i) that premise 3 is false; and (ii) that the apparent evidence for the truth of premise 3 -- in our speech patterns and intuitive judgements -- can be explained away. The explaining away has "three main parts" (233). *First*, speakers are disposed to confuse certain attitude sentences with metalinguistic counterparts, e.g., to confuse the sentence 'A believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus' with the

sentence ‘A believes ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ is true’. *Second*, speakers are mistakenly disposed to infer from A’s failure to assent to the sentence ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ to the truth of the claim that A does not believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus. And, *third*, there is an established practice of using attitude sentences to convey propositions other than those which are the genuine semantic contents of those sentences -- e.g. to use the sentence ‘A believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus’ to convey the claim that A believes a certain proposition taking it the way he would were it presented to him by the very sentence ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’.

Taken in itself, this response is pretty weak. The neo-Fregean intuition is that the propositions which Salmon claims are merely “conveyed” by attitude sentences under “an established practice” are actually the semantic contents of those sentences. If the neo-Fregeans are right, then no errors need to be imputed to ordinary speakers -- they are not involved in the confusions and mistakes which Salmon attributes to them.

Clearly, this is a point in favour of the neo-Fregean view -- though, of course, not one which could not be outweighed by other (theoretical) considerations. Moreover, it is hard to see how Salmon could think that the neo-Fregean view suffers from damaging theoretical deficiencies -- e.g. inconsistency, practical unworkability, etc. For it seems reasonable to think that the ‘established practice’ to which Salmon adverts will have an explanation with exactly the same structure as the neo-Fregean explanation of the distribution of truth-values. Note, in particular, that the ‘established practice’ is systematic, productive, etc. -- i.e. it has precisely those virtues which are used to justify the claim that natural languages have recursively structured semantics. Even if one thinks that the practice is strictly speaking a mistake, it seems that one cannot deny that its workings have an explanation of a ‘neo-Fregean’ flavour -- for the

judgements about attitude sentences which people actually make are clearly neither miraculously nor accidentally convergent.

Even if the neo-Russellian response to the argument about substitutivity is pretty weak, this is not to say that it won't ultimately prevail. It could be that overall considerations of simplicity, explanatory power, empirical adequacy, and so on, favour the neo-Russellian view over the neo-Fregean view. However, the important point to note is that there are local reasons here to favour the neo-Fregean view. Unless the neo-Russellians do demonstrably better elsewhere, the argument from substitutivity does constitute a good reason for adopting the neo-Fregean alternative.

3. The Argument About Individual Variables

As evidence for the neo-Russellian view, Salmon urges the case of individual variables. Consider the quasi-formal sentence: ' $(\exists x)[x = \text{the planet Venus} \ \& \ \text{Jones believes that } x \text{ is a star}]$ '. Salmon claims that "it follows by the principles of conventional formal semantics" that this sentence is true iff its component open sentence -- ' $\text{Jones believes that } x \text{ is a star}$ ' -- is true under the assignment of the planet Venus as value for the variable ' x '. Next, consider the "colloquial English"¹

¹ There is, I think, a genuine question whether "*de re* locutions" do belong to colloquial English. Clearly, these sentences do belong to "philosophers' English"; but it could be that they are merely the invention of philosophers of language. (I doubt that anything important hangs on this point: there is no reason to think that the constructions of these sentences violates any of the rules of colloquial English.)

sentence: ‘Jones believes of the planet Venus that it is a star’. Parallel considerations to those just offered suggest that it is true iff the component open sentence -- ‘Jones believes that it is a star’ -- is true under the anaphoric assignment of Venus as referent for ‘it’. Salmon adds: “[T]he fundamental semantic characteristic of a variable with an assigned value, or of a pronoun with a particular referent, is precisely that its information value is just its referent. ... This means that the information value of the variable or of the pronoun must be its referent.” (225)

Neo-Fregeans are bound to disagree. Conventional formal semantics -- in which the information value of a variable or a pronoun is just its referent -- is the semantics of extensional constructions: it does not tell us how variables and pronouns behave in attitude contexts. It could be that there is some extra semantic value which must be assigned to variables and pronouns when these occur within the scope of verbs of propositional attitude. Perhaps the component open sentences are only true under the assignment of the planet Venus and a mode of presentation of that planet as value for the variable and pronoun. Indeed, to insist that the fundamental semantic characteristic of a variable or pronoun is just its referent is simply to beg the question against the neo-Fregean analysis.

There is, however, a price for the neo-Fregean to pay. On this story, the semantic value of the variable in the sub-component open sentences -- ‘x is a star’, ‘It is a star’ -- is not identical with the semantic value of the variable in the component open sentences -- ‘Jones believes that x is a star’, ‘Jones believes that it is a star’. This is an added complexity in the neo-Fregean account. However, neo-Fregeans think that it is a cost worth paying. Moreover, this feature of the neo-Fregean account need not

entail that the neo-Fregean is forced to claim that some intuitively correct inferences are invalid on grounds of equivocation -- consider, e.g., relevant instances of: 'Jones believes that p; whatever Jones believes is true; therefore p' -- for, of course, while the semantic values differ, there are relationships of proper containment which obtain amongst them. (Two examples which Salmon gives are: 'The physician believes whatever the laboratory test indicates; the test indicates that Mary has contracted the disease; hence the physician believes that Mary has contracted the disease' and 'It is necessary that Mary is human; Jones believes that Mary is human; hence Jones believes at least one necessary truth'. The neo-Fregean can suppose that some of the occurrences of 'Mary' in these sentences do not have modes of presentation as part of their semantic content -- the word 'that' is not an infallible guide to their presence -- while nonetheless maintaining that the arguments are validated by neo-Fregean semantics.²)

4. The Argument About The Irrelevance Of Actual Usage

² Salmon writes "Notice .. the relative lack of hesitation in substituting for 'Mary' in 'The test indicates that Mary has contracted the disease' any other proper name Mary may have, or even the pronoun 'she' accompanied by ostension to Mary. ... Notice also our reluctance to substitute 'the woman who spent 17 years studying primate behaviour in the wild'." I think that Salmon is here being misled by pragmatic facts about (contextual) accommodation. 'The test indicates that x has contracted the disease' has two readings; on one reading, the test identifies who it is who has contracted the disease (Mary rather than Joan has the disease); on the other, the test is applied to persons whose identity is supposed to be antecedently established (Mary has this disease rather than some other problem). The use of an identifying description -- 'the woman who spent 17 years studying primate behaviour' -- in the sentence strongly encourages the first kind of reading; hence the resistance to substitution given that one has the second kind of reading in mind.

Salmon claims that the phenomena which are adverted to in the arguments about informativeness and substitutivity in attitude contexts cannot be taken to refute the neo-Russellian theory because the same phenomena “would arise even in a language for which the [neo-Russellian theory] were true by fiat and unanimous consent”. Moreover, the same phenomena arise in those parts of our actual language for which the neo-Russellian theory is true by unanimous consent -- namely, for “straightforward strict synonyms” such as ‘ketchup’ and ‘catsup’.

Neo-Fregeans do not believe that the neo-Russellian theory is true for “straightforward strict synonyms”. For neo-Fregeans, strict synonyms are terms which can be interchanged *salva veritate* in extensional contexts, but which cannot be thus interchanged in non-extensional contexts including attitude contexts. Take Salmon’s example: “Sasha believes that ketchup is a sandwich condiment, but he does not believe that catsup is”. Despite Salmon’s avowals to the contrary, neo-Fregeans will maintain that this sentence need not express a logical impossibility: it could be that Sasha has two different ways of taking the same kind of stuff -- two different mental files, two different ‘concepts’ -- and that, in context, one of these gets associated with ‘ketchup’, and the other with ‘catsup’. (Perhaps the appeal to context is not essential here, but it is an important feature of the kind of neo-Fregean view which I favour.) While it is true that, even in Sasha’s idiolect, the two words are perfectly synonymous, neo-Fregeans deny that it follows that they must have the same semantic content in all contexts -- and, in particular, they deny that it follows that they must have the same semantic content when embedded in attitude contexts.

(Perhaps I should note in passing that this argument commits me to a denial of the claim that the information value of a term is “an associated purely conceptual representation”. Even if I cannot tell a beech from an elm -- so that, in a certain sense, my concept of an ‘elm’ is no different from my concept of a ‘beech’ -- it doesn’t follow that I must think that there is no difference in the semantic content of the two terms on all occasions of use. In particular, I think that it would be a mistake to think that the material which is contributed from context -- the information about or constraints upon modes of presentation -- is purely conceptual. On the other hand, it seems to me that Salmon’s claims about the information value of ‘naked’ terms are also controversial: I think that it is (contingent) analytic and *a priori* that elms are called ‘elms’, and that this is part of the concept associated with the word ‘elm’. However, I don’t want to pursue these considerations here.³)

Neo-Fregeans also deny that the controversial phenomena would arise even in a language for which the [neo-Russellian theory] were true by fiat and unanimous consent. True enough, it would be useful for those who spoke a neo-Russellian

³ One brief observation. Salmon argues that it is not analytic or *a priori* that elms are called ‘elms’ in English. I agree. I hold that it is analytic and *a priori* that elms are called ‘elms’ in the language (dialect, idiolect) in which this very sentence is formulated. However, it is not analytic that, and I do not *know a priori* that, this language (dialect, idiolect) is English.

Perhaps it is worth adding that I do not think that it is at all obvious that the information value of ‘naked’ terms is “an associated purely conceptual representation”. It could be that terms in different languages can share an associated purely conceptual representation -- and, in virtue of this fact, count as expressions of the same concept -- while at the same time differing with respect to content which is not purely conceptual; and -- leaving aside questions about other languages -- it could be that some terms are required to have “ostensive” content (consider, for example, the case of colour terms). Moreover, even if the information value of a ‘naked’ term is a purely conceptual representation, it doesn’t follow on my account that it is impossible for terms in different languages to express the same content: it could be that terms in different languages share an associated purely conceptual representation of necessary (or essential) information -- and, in virtue of this fact, count as expressions of the same concept -- while at the same time differing with respect to merely contingent but analytic and *a priori* (indexical) content.

language to adopt our established practice: but in so doing they would be contravening the conventions to which they had pledged allegiance. Instead, those who wish to remain faithful to neo-Russellian principles should opt for some other strategy -- e.g. one in which modes of presentation are introduced into semantic content by additional vocabulary. (E.g.: ‘Jones believes the singular proposition about Venus that it is it when taking it in the way that he would were it presented to him by the very sentence ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ (assuming that he understands this sentence).’) Of course, the problem is that none of these alternatives is as elegant as the neo-Fregean option: the alternatives all require the use of many more words, etc. But, if one cares about this, then what one has is an argument for linguistic reform: one should renounce neo-Russellianism, and opt for the neo-Fregean alternative! In other words: despite Salmon’s claims to the contrary, the phenomena in question do count as evidence -- albeit less than decisive evidence -- against the neo-Russellian view.

5. The Argument About Notational Variance

Salmon claims that it is a mistake to claim that his neo-Russellian theory is a mere notational variant of a neo-Fregean theory. I agree. He also argues that it is hard to see how to get a neo-Fregean theory which gives the same distribution of truth-values to sentence-tokenings as the one provided by his neo-Russellian theory. Again, I agree. Moreover, I think that the attempt to provide such a theory would be rather

pointless. One of the chief advantages of neo-Fregean theories is that they can give a distribution of truth-values to sentence-tokenings which is less at variance with pre-theoretical intuitions. Why would neo-Fregean theorists wish to forgo this advantage?

There is more to be said, however. As I have argued elsewhere, it seems to me that neo-Russellian and neo-Fregean theories are bound to be structural variants -- i.e. theories which make use of the same kinds of theoretical structures, but deployed in different domains. Earlier, I noted that neo-Russellian theorists seem bound to appeal to the apparatus of neo-Fregean semantic theory in order to explain our actual 'established practice' of using attitude ascriptions. True enough, from the neo-Russellian perspective, this theory does not belong to semantics; but that does not mean that it plays no part in the overall theory of language -- semantics, pragmatics, linguistic communication, etc. -- which the neo-Russellian provides.

Suppose that this last point is right. Then it suggests a reason to favour the neo-Fregean option. Given that there is no overall difference in simplicity, explanatory power, etc., there is reason to favour the theory which delivers results which diverge least from pre-theoretical judgements. In the case at hand, it is clear that this is the neo-Fregean option. Of course, the assertion that there is no overall difference in simplicity, explanatory power, etc. could do with more defence -- i.e. it is not made out simply by the observation that the two theories are structural variants. However, it does seem to me that the burden of proof is now shifted squarely onto the shoulders of the neo-Russellian. Until the neo-Russellian provides us with a fully worked out pragmatics and a fully worked out account of our 'established practice' of using attitude ascriptions, it seems reasonable to think that the neo-Fregean alternative

should be preferred: it does better in point of conformity to pre-theoretical intuition, and there is no reason to think that it does worse in point of *overall* simplicity, explanatory power, etc. (even though it does do worse in point of these considerations restricted solely to questions of semantics).⁴

⁴ “Who wants to be a Millian heir? I don’t. I don’t.”