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REASSESSING REFERENTIAL INDETERMINACY

ABSTRACT. Quine and Davidson employ proxy functions to demonstrate that the use of language (behaviouristically conceived) is compatible with indefinitely many radically different reference relations. They also believe that the use of language (behaviouristically conceived) is all that determines reference. From this they infer that reference is indeterminate, i.e. that there are no facts of the matter as to what singular terms designate and what predicates apply to. Yet referential indeterminacy yields rather dire consequences. One thus does wonder whether one can hold on to a Quine–Davidson stance in semantics-cum-metaphysics and still avoid embracing referential indeterminacy. I argue that one can. Anyone adhering to the behaviouristic account pivotal to the Quine–Davidson stance is bound to acknowledge certain facts about verbal behaviour – that some utterances are tied to situations, that some utterances are tied to segments in situations, that some predicates have non-contextualised conditions of application, and that use involves causal dependencies. The restrictions from these facts ensure that only reference relations generated by means of rather exceptional proxy functions are compatible with verbal behaviour. I conclude that this allows one to rebuff the Quine–Davidson argument for the indeterminacy of reference, as it were, from within. I moreover tentatively conclude that the line of thought laid out provides good reason for just about anyone to hold that there are facts about reference after all.

1. THE THESIS EXPLORED

Celebrated ideas often share the fate of human celebrities: they become shrouded in a haze of publicity, adoration, and rumour. This might very well be true of the claim that reference is indeterminate.¹ So let me begin with some clarifications. Firstly, the thesis concerns semantic reference, not speaker’s reference.² It is a thesis about what singular terms as well as their utterances designate and what predicates as well as their utterances apply to. Secondly, the thesis is not an epistemological claim.³ What is claimed is rather that there are no facts of the matter as to what singular terms designate and what predicates apply to. Speaking of the “inscrutability of reference” hence is misleading – as Quine acknowledges: “It is what I have called inscrutability of reference; ‘indeterminacy of reference’ would have been better”.⁴ Thirdly, the thesis is neither to be confused with, nor
grounded in, the claim that many terms are vague and/or ambiguous. Neither phenomenon plays any role in the arguments Quine and Davidson put forth. Indeterminacy of reference is thought to arise even if we idealise away vagueness and ambiguity. Fourthly, the indeterminacy of reference is independent of any indeterminacy of logical form. Quine and Davidson agree that even if one assumes a determinate logical form, reference still comes out indeterminate. Finally, the thesis is meant to cover all languages. Indeterminacy is not confined to distant primitive tongues. As the saying goes, indeterminacy begins at home.

Anyone who holds that reference is indeterminate is hence committed to the claim that there are no facts of the matter as to what singular terms designate and what predicates apply to. To render this idea more lucid, let me define an interpretation of a language $L$ to be a complete assignment of extensions to the singular terms and predicates of $L$. Let us furthermore agree to call some interpretation correct for some language $L$ if and only if it is compatible with all the facts that determine the semantic properties of $L$. Employing this terminology, the thesis that reference is indeterminate – that there are no facts of the matter pertaining to reference – unfolds thus:

$$(IR) \quad \text{For every language } L, \text{ there are indefinitely many fundamentally different yet equally correct interpretations.}$$

This is precisely what Quine and Davidson, the avowed champions of indeterminacy, seek to establish. Please note that the claim they aim to prove is neutral with respect to their general approach in semantics-cum-metaphysics. The indeterminacy thesis is neither wedded to any specific stance in semantics, nor is it intrinsically linked to the scenario of radical translation or interpretation, respectively. Since Quine and Davidson often run the thesis together with what they take to be the argument to establish its truth, this is easy to miss.

The indeterminacy thesis is not perfectly neutral, though. It comes with two rather sensible background assumptions. The one assumption is that semantic facts are dependent facts. What sentences mean – what their truth conditions are – and what words refer to is in the end fixed by non-semantic facts. Assuming otherwise would run counter to what Quine and Davidson believe. It furthermore would turn at least some semantic facts into brute facts, and that is hardly appealing. The other assumption is that reference is a substantial relation between words and things rather than a purely disquotational intra-linguistic relation. That again makes sense. For it is very