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Beyond Rigidity: Reply to McKinsey

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Michael McKinsey raises several important and far-reaching issues in his critical examination of *Beyond Rigidity*. I am happy to have a chance to respond, and thereby, I hope, to advance the debate.

I Assertion

I begin with his remarks on assertion. McKinsey objects to my view that a speaker who assertively utters a sentence often says something that differs from, or goes beyond, the proposition it semantically expresses. He begins by discussing one of my simplest examples.

1. I am Scott Soames.

He agrees that if I say this introducing myself to someone, I am correctly counted as telling that person that my name is 'Scott Soames.' However, he denies that in asserting this I have said anything beyond the semantic content of the sentence uttered. Rather, he holds that in addition to its ordinary meaning, (1) has a second, idiomatic meaning which I invoke on this occasion. He thinks this because he takes it to be a convention to use names in this way in introductions — and where there is convention, I suppose, there is meaning.

I disagree. If, in trying to avoid someone regaling me about the errors in my book, I say

2. Why are you talking to me? I am not Scott Soames.

I haven't invoked any special convention for avoiding critics. Nevertheless, if the critic later complains saying, 'Can you believe it? He had the gall to deny that his name was ''Scott Soames,''' I would have to admit that he was right. Similarly, if, during Mike's talk, I inform Martha, who is lecturing, by assertively uttering

3. He is Mike McKinsey,

and Martha is later asked whether she knows the lecturer's name, she may truly report, 'Scott said that his name is ''Mike McKinsey,''' even though no special pointing-out convention has been invoked. Moreover, the non-semantic assertions I made are not limited to the metalinguistic. If, during the lecture, Martha's neighbor asks her who is speaking, she may whisper, 'Scott said that Mike McKinsey is speaking.' Ordinarily we would all take her remark to be true. If it is, then in this case, as in the others, I said more than what was semantically expressed by the sentence uttered.

In *Beyond Rigidity*, I presented a wealth of examples demonstrating the ubiquity of this phenomenon, while also explaining it. Utterances take place against a background of shared presuppositions about linguistic conventions governing the words used, salient features of the context, and background beliefs of conversational participants. Very roughly put, someone who assertively utters S in such a context counts as having said p, if the presuppositions of the conversational background warrant a direct, obvious, and relevant inference from the speaker's utterance to p. In such a case, conversational participants must be warranted in taking the speaker both to be committed to p, and to intend them to recognize this on the basis of the speaker's utterance. The reason it is routine for speakers to assert more than the propositions semantically expressed by the sentences uttered is that it is routine for them to exploit the shared conversational background in determining the communicative contents of their remarks.

Why, then, does McKinsey take it to be obvious that what seems to me to be routine seldom, if ever, occurs? The main reason, I think, is that he focuses on one special kind of case. His scenarios have four features: (i) The proposition semantically expressed by the sentence uttered is true. (ii) The presuppositions in the conversational background include falsehoods. (iii) These falsehoods warrant an inference, which all conversational participants can be presumed to recognize, from the speaker's utterance to a proposition p which goes beyond the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence uttered. (iv) It is later discovered that p is false, and the question is raised whether the speaker should be accused of asserting it. In these cases, McKinsey maintains, we would

resist such an accusation. I, too, sometimes feel such resistance. Nevertheless, I believe McKinsey draws the wrong conclusions from it.

First, not all cases fit his scenarios. Suppose a terrorist calls a radio station and informs them that he has placed a small nuclear weapon in a packed stadium. He says, 'The bomb is set to detonate when the cell phone to which it is connected rings. I will call the number in 15 minutes unless you broadcast my manifesto.' Suppose the station broadcasts the manifesto, and the terrorist doesn't detonate the bomb. No false conversational presuppositions here. The station manager might later explain why he aired the manifesto by saying, 'A terrorist made a threatening call to us. He *said* he would detonate a bomb, destroying a stadium filled with people, if we didn't broadcast his manifesto.' In giving this explanation, the station manager would, I think, be telling the truth.

Now change the scenario slightly. The radio station doesn't air the manifesto, the terrorist makes the call, but the bomb doesn't detonate because the battery in the cell phone is dead. No one is hurt, but the terrorist is arrested anyway for threatening their lives. Could the terrorist successfully plead, 'All I *said* was that I would make the call — I never *said* the cell phone would ring, that the bomb would detonate, or that stadium would be destroyed'? I don't think so. The terrorist would be convicted of having said the threatening things he is charged with saying.

McKinsey might protest that although the terrorist threatened those things by implication, the terrorist didn't, strictly speaking, *say* them. Although I am not convinced, I suspect that McKinsey is reacting to something real. Note the slight change in language — it is claimed that the terrorist didn't, *strictly speaking*, say the things in question. This suggests that standards for what counts as saying something may sometimes be strict, and sometimes not. As I indicated on page 336 of *Beyond Rigidity*, one may think of this roughly as follows: an ascription ***A said that S*** is true in a reporting context iff (i) A assertively uttered a sentence S* in the asserting context, and (ii) the presuppositions of the conversation in that context warranted a direct, obvious, and relevant inference from A's utterance to the proposition semantically expressed by S in the reporting context.[1] Suppose further that standards for being a direct, obvious, and relevant inference vary from one context to another. Often, when reporting assertions, we allow for an expansive conception of such inferences, whereas in certain special contexts — such as a trial — we may be very strict, and not count much beyond the semantic content of

1 Here, and throughout, I use boldface italics to play the role of corner quotes.

the sentence uttered as satisfying the standards. If this is right, then there will be reporting contexts C1 and C2 such that ***A said that S*** has different truth values in the two contexts, even though both the proposition reported to have been asserted and the utterance reported are the same. Thus, there may be cases in which the report ***A said that S*** is true in C1 while the report ***A didn't say that S*** is true in C2, even though S has the same semantic content in both contexts. In such cases, what might at first seem to be a factual dispute may turn out to be no dispute at all, but simply the result of adopting different discretionary standards for inferring what has been asserted from the speaker's utterance plus what is presupposed in the conversational background.

It is, I think, no accident that McKinsey's contexts are ones in which certain defective background presuppositions warrant a falsehood to be inferred from the speaker's utterance. In these cases, a question is raised as to whether the speaker should be saddled with having asserted something false. Since to make this judgment would often be to criticize the speaker, we may sometimes wish to avoid this by tightening the standards used for reporting assertions — with the result that certain assertion ascriptions come to be counted as false, even though they are true in more relaxed contexts. This may be the kernel of truth behind some of McKinsey's intuitions. If it is, then one can accommodate it, while continuing to affirm that what is asserted often goes beyond the semantic content of what is assertively uttered.

My final point on this topic addresses McKinsey's complaint that there is, as he puts it, no good reason to believe that speakers ever use simple sentences like 'Peter Hempel is Carl Hempel' to assert descriptively enriched propositions. I reply by spelling out in more detail one of the cases sketched in the book. The scene is a philosophy department party in the 90s. One of the new graduate students asks me if any Princeton philosophers are former members of the Vienna Circle. I reply by assertively uttering (4a).

4a. Carl Hempel is a former member of the Vienna Circle.

Since my remark was made in answer to the question, 'Are any Princeton professors former members of the Vienna Circle?' it can truthfully be reported using (5a).

5a. Soames said that the Princeton professor, Carl Hempel, is a former member of the Vienna Circle.

Thus, my utterance of (4a) counts as an assertion of the descriptively enriched (6a), which goes beyond the semantic content of the sentence I uttered.

6a. The Princeton professor, Carl Hempel, is a former member of the Vienna Circle.

A few seconds later the student asks, 'Who is that man standing over there?' while discreetly gesturing at Mr. Hempel, who is standing nearby. I answer by assertively uttering (4b).

4b. He is Peter Hempel

Given the context, one could truly report my assertion using (5b).

5b. Soames said that Peter Hempel is the man standing over there.

Thus, my utterance of (4b) counts as an assertion of the proposition expressed by (6b), even though that proposition is not semantically expressed by the sentence I uttered.

6b. Peter Hempel is the man standing over there.

Finally, I add (4c).

4c. Oh, I forgot you didn't know. Peter Hempel is Carl Hempel.

Putting this utterance together with the import of my previous remarks, one could use (5c) to report what I said.

5c. Soames said that the man, Peter Hempel, standing over there is the Princeton professor, Carl Hempel.

Hence, my utterance of (4c) in this context counts as an assertion of the descriptively enriched proposition (6c), just as I said in *Beyond Rigidity*.

6c. The man, Peter Hempel, standing over there is the Princeton professor, Carl Hempel.

One might reasonably ask how often this sort of thing occurs, and how much of a role it plays in understanding Frege's Puzzle. These are legitimate questions about the scope and significance of the kind of descriptive enrichment I emphasize. My point is minimal; such enrichment does occur, and it plays some role in resolving Frege's Puzzle.

II Partially Descriptive Names

I now turn to partially descriptive names, the existence of which McKinsey denies. According to him my examples are of three types — those that are descriptive but not names, those that are names but are not descriptive, and those that are neither. My example, 'Trenton New Jersey,' is alleged to be of the first type. McKinsey agrees with me that its descriptive content includes the city, the state, and the relation of being located in. Hence, he agrees that (7a) is equivalent to (7b).

7a. *Trenton, New Jersey* is a small city.

b. *Trenton*, which is located in *New Jersey*, is a small city.

But he quibbles that the expression 'Trenton New Jersey' is a not a name, apparently because it is syntactically complex. What he fails to notice is that it is not an instance of a productive grammatical construction. If it were, one would expect that well-formed phrases of the form 'A, which is located in B' could typically be collapsed into name-like units on a par with 'Trenton New Jersey.' As sentences (8-11) illustrate, typically they can't be so collapsed.

8a. *Trenton*, which is located in *the state between New York and Pennsylvania*, is a small city.

b. **Trenton, the state between New York and Pennsylvania*, is a small city.[2]

9a. *Trenton*, which is located in *The Garden State*, is a small city.

b. **Trenton, the Garden State* is a small city.[3]

10a. There is a certain state, namely New Jersey, such that the average income in it is twice as high as that of *Trenton*, which is located in *it*, and *Newark*, which is located in *it*.

b. *There is a certain state, namely New Jersey, such that the average income in it is twice as high as that of *Trenton, it* and *Newark, it*.

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2 The '*' here indicates that, although grammatical, (8b) doesn't mean what (8a) means.

3 'The Garden State' is another name of New Jersey.

11a. *Mexico*, which is located in *North America*, devalued the peso.

b. **Mexico, North America* devalued the peso.

These examples suggest that expressions like 'Trenton New Jersey' are syntactically (though not morphologically) simple, and function essentially as lexical items, despite being semantically complex. This, I believe, justifies treating them as names. McKinsey's worrisome comma is, I think, simply an orthographic convention, not marked in speech — which is the primary unit of linguistic analysis. His discussion of how many names the city has is similarly beside the point. Like me, it has two — 'Trenton' and 'Trenton New Jersey.' However, since the two names are closely related, historical chains of reference transmission for one are not independent of those for the other. Thus, 'Trenton New Jersey' is a partially descriptive name.

McKinsey's second category includes examples like 'Mr. Saul Kripke' and 'Professor David Lewis,' consisting of a proper name and a title. Although he takes these to be strictly Millian, he denies they are names. I disagree on both counts. To speak of these expressions simply as names is, I concede, to stretch our ordinary, pre-theoretic conception of a name just a bit. However, complete fidelity to ordinary use of the word 'name' is not crucial. From a theoretical point of view, these expressions belong in the same class with simple names. The semantic contents of members of this class include their referents, these referents are determined largely or entirely nondescriptively, and whenever an expression in the class has a referent with respect to any circumstance, it never has a different referent with respect to any other circumstance. In addition, members of the class function syntactically like lexical items, rather than instances of productive grammatical constructions. Their lexicality is illustrated in (12) and (13).

12a. Dr. Hagaman, Professor Lewis

b. *Physician Hagaman, *Teacher Lewis

13a. Mr. Saul Kripke, Professor David Lewis

b. *Mr. the author of *Naming and Necessity*, *Professor the author of *Counterfactuals*

c. *Mr. that man, *Professor him

d. *Mr. some man, *Professor each man

(12) shows that although the pairs 'doctor' / 'physician' and 'professor' / 'teacher' are synonyms, or near synonyms, the terms 'Dr. Hagaman' and 'Professor Lewis' are well formed, while 'Physician Hagaman' and 'Teacher Lewis' are not. There is no syntactic reason for this; it is simply a matter of the partially idiosyncratic nature of morphologically complex lexical items. (13) reminds us that even though one can refer to a person using a proper name, a definite description, a demonstrative, or a pronoun functioning as a bound variable, one can attach a title only to a linguistically simple name. The tight constraints on the formation of these terms suggest that they are simple grammatical units, rather than a grammatically compound phrases. The main difference between these partially descriptive names and their linguistically simple counterparts is that while simple names are routinely susceptible to modest descriptive enrichment by pragmatically salient information, this process is partially conventionalized in the case of partially descriptive names.

This brings us to their semantics. Although McKinsey takes them to be entirely Millian, and thoroughly nondescriptive, he considers an analysis which agrees with mine in taking 'Princess Diana' to be roughly equivalent to the description 'the x: x = Diana & x is a princess.' His most important criticism of this analysis is based on an objection I raise in the book on pages 113-14. The objection is that we continue to use 'Princess Diana' to designate her, even though she is dead, and so is no longer a princess. In the book, I point out that whatever explains this fact does not disqualify the term from being a partially descriptive name, since the same explanation applies to the descriptive phrase 'my mother.' which denotes my mother even though she is dead, and so no longer is a mother. McKinsey objects that she still is a mother, since individuals retain their kinship properties even when they no longer exist. Maybe so, but the phenomenon is more general.

14a. The longtime Princeton professor, David Lewis, is dead.

b. My first philosophy teacher is dead.

c. England's beloved princess, Diana, is dead.

The subject expressions in these examples are clearly descriptive phrases, and the sentences are true, despite the fact that, as McKinsey himself acknowledges, only the living are professors, teachers, or princesses.

So what is going on? On pages 114 and 342 of *Beyond Rigidity*, I speculate that an implicit tense indicator may be contextually supplied by the context, so that the description in (14b) is understood as 'the person who *was* my first philosophy teacher,' and the description in (14c)

is analyzed as 'the x: x = Diana & x *was* England's beloved princess' (with the variable ranging over individuals past and present). Obviously, this explanation of (14) can also be applied to sentences containing partially descriptive names, thereby solving the problem that McKinsey takes to be insuperable. It also explains why we can still use the partially descriptive name 'President Ford' to refer to Jerrold Ford after he has left office, and why we could continue to use the partially descriptive name 'Snoqualmie Falls' to denote its referent, even if it dried up.

McKinsey's final criticism centers on names like 'Snoqualmie Falls,' 'New York City,' 'Mount Rainer,' and 'Lake Washington.' He agrees with me that these are names, while denying that they are partially descriptive. One of his objections — the 'Snoqualmie Falls' problem — has already been rebutted. His other objection can also be dispensed with. He notes, as I do on pages 111 and 119, that sometimes expressions that have the form of partially descriptive names are, in fact, thoroughly Millian. In these cases, it is obvious that the descriptive words that occur in the names are not predicated of their referents. His example is 'Mackinaw City,' which names a town in Michigan too small to be a city. My examples were 'The Millstone River' which names a creek in Princeton, and 'Queen Latifa' and 'Professor Longhair,' which are stage names of entertainers, rather than names of queens or professors. But the fact that such cases exist doesn't show that there are no genuine partially descriptive names, any more than the fact that the Millian, pseudo-description 'The Holy Roman Empire' shows that there are no semantically genuine definite descriptions. Special cases like 'Queen Latifa' and 'Mackinaw City' should be understood as deviations from the normal partially descriptive model, not the other way around. For all these reasons, I believe that my category of partially descriptive names withstands McKinsey's attack.

III The Pragmatic Explanation of Substitution Failure

In the final section of his paper, McKinsey questions my pragmatic explanation of apparent instances of substitution failure in attitude ascriptions. Most of his critique is based on his earlier objections to my view of what is asserted and conveyed by utterances of simple sentences. Since I have already rebutted those, I won't say more about them here. However, at one point he raises a more serious problem. You will recall, I claimed that the descriptively enriched proposition

6a. The Princeton professor, Carl Hempel, is a former member of the Vienna Circle.

is asserted and conveyed by my utterance of

4a. Carl Hempel is a former member of the Vienna Circle.

in answer to the question 'Are any Princeton professors former members of the Vienna Circle?' This claim may seem to conflict with the widely accepted Kripkean intuition that what is said by (4a) would remain true in a world-state w in which Carl Hempel was a former member of the Vienna Circle, even though he never taught at Princeton in w. Thus, it might seem that if I am right, then Kripke must be wrong.

My own view of the matter is a little different. Certain Kripkean facts and intuitions are undeniable. First, *one* of the propositions asserted by my utterance of (4a) is indeed true in w, despite the fact that Mr. Hempel never teaches at Princeton in w. If we focus on this proposition when considering the Kripkean question, we get the orthodox Kripkean answer. Second, an analogous point holds for *every* utterance of (4a) in a normal context, no matter what the descriptive enrichment in the context. In all such contexts, the speaker asserts a proposition the truth of which requires *only* that Mr. Hempel be a former member of the Vienna Circle. Third, though descriptive enrichments exist, they are idiosyncratic, and highly variable from one context to the next. Thus, if we ask, independent of any particular context, whether a given predicate D must be satisfied by Mr. Hempel in order for the sentence (4a) to be true at a world-state, we will always get the answer 'no' — since for any such predicate we can easily imagine many contexts in which the property expressed by D is no part of what is said. All of these facts underlie and legitimate the intuitions behind Kripke's celebrated modal argument — which remains intact.

What needs to be emphasized is that all of this is compatible with my observation that in certain contexts — with sufficiently rich and robust background assumptions — utterances of (4a) result in the assertion of propositions the truth conditions of which exceed the bare Millian ones. Thus, as I see it, Kripke and I are both right. In fact, I take my observations about descriptive enrichment to strengthen his position by explaining some of the noise in the system. Many philosophers claim to have a mix of what they take to be Kripkean and anti-Kripkean intuitions about the modal truth conditions of utterances, and some take this conflict to threaten his basic conclusions. In my view, there is no threat. If, as I believe, the so-called anti-Kripkean intuitions arise from descriptive enrichment of the pragmatic, contextual sort I have identified, then they pose no threat to Kripke's central conclusions.