

Communication and Knowledge: Rejoinder to Byrne and Thau*

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Before I address Byrne and Thau's comments on "The Sense of Communication", let me make a remark about terminology. In that paper, I make use of two notions of cognitive value: First, that of the cognitive value of a sentence for a speaker, which is the content of the belief she would form were she to accept that sentence as true; Secondly, that of the cognitive value of a sentence as such, which is "what is, or ought to be, *common* to the beliefs different speakers who understand it would form were they to accept it as true" (Heck, 1995, p. 87). This terminology is unfortunate,¹ so I shall here switch terminology (and silently adapt Byrne and Thau's comments), speaking not of the cognitive value of a sentence for a speaker, but of its *epistemic value* for her; and not of the cognitive value of the sentence, but of its *linguistic value*.

Byrne and Thau (1996, p. 143) interpret my argument as having three premises:

- ($R \not\Rightarrow K$) Preservation of reference does not suffice to enable the transmission of knowledge.
- ($M \Rightarrow LV$) The meaning of an expression determines its linguistic value, i.e., there can be no difference of linguistic value without a difference in meaning.
- ($LV \Rightarrow K$) Preservation of linguistic value enables the transmission of knowledge.

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¹ It is tempting to think that the cognitive value of a sentence for a speaker is the cognitive value she thinks that sentence has—which it is not. And, since a sentence can have different linguistic values for different speakers (or in different languages), we need to be able to speak of the linguistic value the sentence has in the mouth (or ear) of a particular speaker. But it will be awkward, at best, to speak both of the cognitive value a sentence has for a speaker (i.e., its epistemic value for her) and of the cognitive value the sentence has in the mouth of that speaker (i.e., its linguistic value for her).

The first two are explicit in the paper; the last, Byrne and Thau (1996, p. 141) reach through reconstruction, deriving it from claims explicitly made. One way to derive it would be as follows. The following claim is explicitly made in the paper:

$(U \Rightarrow K)$ Understanding enables the transmission of knowledge.

Now, the linguistic value of a sentence is what is common to the epistemic values assigned to that sentence by all speakers who understand it. And so, apparently, “the cognitive value of a name is *whatever needs to be preserved to ensure communication*” (Byrne and Thau, 1996, fn. 8; their emphasis). Hence, preservation of linguistic value is sufficient for understanding and so, given $(U \Rightarrow K)$, must enable the transmission of knowledge.

This argument, however, is fallacious: It wrongly supposes that the linguistic value of a sentence is some common feature of the epistemic values whose presence *ensures* understanding—so that the presence of this common feature, i.e., preservation of linguistic value, is a *sufficient* condition for understanding. But the linguistic value of a sentence is, rather, what *must be* common to the epistemic values it has for speakers who understand it—so that relevant similarity of epistemic values is only a *necessary* condition of understanding. It is not obvious that there is anything common to the epistemic values a sentence has for different speakers whose presence guarantees understanding—and it would be illegitimate to attempt to define such a thing into existence.

The argument I intended to give in the paper is thus not so straightforward as the one attributed to me. Though I do speak of its conclusion as resting “upon two crucial auxiliary premises” (Heck, 1995, p. 81), this was not meant to suggest that there is any particularly direct argument from these premises to that conclusion. Nor are the two premises $(M \Rightarrow LV)$ and $(LV \Rightarrow K)$, but $(M \Rightarrow LV)$ and $(U \Rightarrow K)$. We shall return shortly to the question what the argument is supposed to be.

Byrne and Thau’s objection to my argument rests upon a counterexample to $(LV \Rightarrow K)$, a principle upon which my argument does not depend—but they take it also to be a counterexample to $(U \Rightarrow K)$, so we must still examine it. We have two speakers, Alex and Tony, who independently introduce a name pronounced “Winston” by saying, “With ‘Winston’ I shall denote the amnesiac in Room 101”. Alex says, in Tony’s presence, “Winston will never recover”, and Tony forms the belief she would express by means of this same sentence. Tony’s belief certainly

does not count as knowledge.² The objection is supposed to be that, in this case, linguistic value has been preserved—and, indeed, Tony has understood Alex—but knowledge has not been transmitted (Byrne and Thau, 1996, p. 147).³

This example is a modification of those I use to introduce the Problem of Content, which challenges us to provide an account of understanding compatible with $(U \Rightarrow K)$ (Heck, 1995, pp. 92–3). As various sorts of replies could be made to the examples used in the paper, there are various sorts of replies one might make to this example. One might hold that what is required for understanding is not just preservation of reference, nor even preservation of some more substantial similarities among the epistemic values speakers assign to an expression, but participation in the same causal network. This would amount to a broadly causal solution to the Problem of Content, and I suggest in the paper that no such solution is likely to work (Heck, 1995, p. 97). But let us ask the following question: If one did, would it follow that the meaning of a name is not just its reference?

One could so describe the position if one liked, saying that the meaning of a name is the causal chain linking various speakers who understand it to its referent (Devitt, 1974). But such a description of the view is not *required* by any of my arguments. If $(M \Rightarrow LV)$ is to yield the conclusion that names with the same reference may have different meanings, we need to establish that such names may have different linguistic values: But it is far from obvious that, on this view, there need be anything beyond reference which is *common to the epistemic values* a name has for all speakers who understand it: It is not obvious that there need be *any* restriction upon what epistemic value a speaker can assign to the name, other than that she get the reference right. It thus

² I have used similar examples myself in conversation and correspondence over the last few years, in discussion of the view that the meaning a speaker ascribes to a given expression can be “private”, in the sense that it is in principle impossible (or even in practice difficult) for other speakers to *know* what meaning any other speaker does assign to a given expression.

³ Byrne and Thau remark that their example directly threatens only the description theory of names. But it threatens a much broader range of views indirectly. For suppose (1) that the epistemic value a speaker assigns to a name can *sometimes* be given by a description and (2) that epistemic value determines linguistic value. If one then reads their example so that the assumption is only that the epistemic value “Winston” has for Tony and Alex is given by the same description, it will pose a problem for any view which combines (1) and (2) with the claim that preservation of linguistic value is sufficient for understanding.

does not follow simply from $(R \not\Rightarrow K)$ and $(U \Rightarrow K)$ that the linguistic value of a name is not just its reference: Merely showing that one has “to distinguish [names] more finely than in terms of their reference. . . does not establish a Fregean view” (Heck, 1995, pp. 97–8).

It is for this reason that I am forced to propose some positive, if incomplete, solution to the Problem of Content, namely, that understanding requires knowledge of reference.⁴ I then claim that speakers will not be able to assign just any epistemic value they like to a name, so long as they get the reference right, if they are all to know to what it refers—that is, that more than the reference of a name must be common to the epistemic values it has for different speakers—and so that the linguistic values of names with the same reference may differ (Heck, 1995, p. 102). No assumption is being made that preservation of linguistic value, relevant similarity in the epistemic values ascribed to a given expression, is *sufficient* for understanding. It is therefore possible that, as in Byrne and Thau’s example, two speakers should ascribe the *same* epistemic value to an utterance of a name and yet not understand one another.

I thus deny that Byrne and Thau have produced a counterexample to $(U \Rightarrow K)$. But why do they *think* that Tony has understood Alex? They do not say much about this, but the reason is clear enough: They take it that what Alex asserted *is* what Tony would assert by means of the very same sentence, and so that Tony takes Alex to have asserted precisely what Alex did assert, that is, truly believes that Alex asserted (as Tony would put it) that Winston will never recover. That is to say, they assume that preservation of meaning suffices for understanding—and meaning has been preserved (Byrne and Thau, 1996, fn. 17).⁵ But since, on my view, meaning is to be identified with linguistic value (Heck, 1995, p. 89) and preservation of linguistic value is not sufficient for understanding, this assumption is to be rejected.

Moreover, consider the following variation on the example.⁶ Suppose that, instead of dubbing the amnesiac in Room 101 “Winston”, Tony had dubbed him “Wilson”. Alex says to Tony, “Winston will never recover”,

⁴ I remain uncertain whether knowledge of reference is *sufficient* for understanding (Heck, 1995, p. 101, fn. 33). But this does not matter at present.

⁵ The claim “that ‘preservation of meaning...is sufficient for understanding’” is not one I anywhere make, but is taken from their own p. 142.

⁶ This case parallels one discussed in “The Sense of Communication” (Heck, 1995, pp. 94–5) in the same way that Byrne and Thau’s original case parallels that discussed immediately afterwards.

and Tony forms the belief she would express as “Wilson will never recover”. Surely we do not want to say that Tony has understood Alex in this case. But what possible difference can it make that, in Byrne and Thau’s example, the name introduced by Tony happens to be homonymous with that introduced by Alex? There is, after all, an intuition that the names introduced by Tony and Alex are simply *different names* which happen to be pronounced the same way (Heck, 1995, p. 95): If so, then the cases differ only insignificantly, and it is unclear what philosophical interest could attach to a notion of understanding that distinguished them. But then we should also deny that Tony has understood Alex in Byrne and Thau’s original case, even though meaning has been preserved, and $(U \Rightarrow K)$ is not threatened.

But we can not let the matter rest there, for Byrne and Thau also raise questions about my argument for $(U \Rightarrow K)$. In brief, that argument ran as follows. It is widely agreed that, although speakers may assign different epistemic values to a name and yet all understand it, they must at least assign it the same reference. But what argument can be given for this claim? especially by a defender of the Hybrid View? According to me, the only available argument requires, as one of its premises:⁷

$(U \Rightarrow TB)$ Understanding enables the transmission of true belief.

I later argue that, although it is *true* that understanding must enable the transmission of true belief, this claim is too weak: The purpose of communication is not merely to transfer true belief from speaker to speaker, but to transfer *knowledge* (Heck, 1995, pp. 91–2).

Byrne and Thau object, to the argument for $(U \Rightarrow TB)$, that since “the Hybrid View implies the claim that preservation of reference is necessary and sufficient for understanding, . . . [i]t is hard to see why . . . any *additional* argument for this” is required (Byrne and Thau, 1996, p. 147; their emphasis). But the question was simply what argument *has* been given—or, if none has, what argument *can* be given. Arguments in

⁷ Byrne and Thau are puzzled by my remark that the argument of the paper shows only that “the meaning of a proper name exceeds its reference *if* belief is intensional” (Heck, 1995, p. 82), asking at what point this assumption is required. Here. One who denied the intensionality of belief could insist that reference must be preserved in communication because successful communication is, in the first instance, a matter of discovering the beliefs of other speakers (from which we might infer something about the world). This response is not open to a proponent of the Hybrid View: The identification of other speakers’ beliefs, *if those beliefs are intensional*, would require more than a mere identification of the references of the proper names used in their expression (Heck, 1995, p. 85).

favor of the Hybrid View typically assume that the meaning of a name determines its reference and then argue that no more is required for understanding than agreement about reference. There is nothing wrong with, e.g., Kripke's making this assumption: His opponents accept it, too. But we can still ask with what right we all make it.

As far as I can see, the only real option is to explain why the references of names must be preserved in terms of the fact that the references of *sentences*, their truth-values, must be preserved: To argue that one can not have understood an assertion unless the belief one would form, were one to accept it as true, must have the same truth-value as that expressed by the speaker; and then to argue that reference needs to be preserved, because this is necessary if the truth-value of one's newly acquired belief is to be properly tied to the truth-value of that expressed. But that is precisely to say that reference must be preserved because $(U \Rightarrow TB)$ holds.

It is not this, but the next, step of the argument which is problematic: That which takes us from $(U \Rightarrow TB)$ to $(U \Rightarrow K)$. Little is done in the paper to defend this move, except to suggest that, even if our ultimate goal in communication is to acquire and disseminate true beliefs, the only means to this end is the acquisition and dissemination of *knowledge*—or, at least, justified belief (Heck, 1995, pp. 91–2). Of course, there is much more to be said about the matter, but I am in no position to say it here.⁸

References

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- Devitt, M. (1974). 'Singular terms', *Journal of Philosophy* 71: 183–205.
- Heck, R. G. (1995). 'The sense of communication', *Mind* 104: 79–106.

⁸ Thanks to Alex Byrne, Christopher Gauker, Jason Stanley and Michael Thau for discussion. Special thanks are due to Alex and Mike for writing their reply. I have benefitted greatly from thought about it—as a look at early drafts of this rejoinder would confirm.