

Boghossian, Miller and Lewis on Dispositional Theories of Meaning

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Abstract: Paul Boghossian has pointed out a ‘circularity problem’ for dispositionalist theories of meaning: as a result of the holistic character of belief fixation, one cannot identify someone’s meaning such and such with facts of the form S is disposed to utter P under conditions C, without C involving the semantic and intentional notions that such a theory was to explain. Alex Miller has recently suggested an ‘ultra-sophisticated dispositionalism’ (modelled on David Lewis’s well-known version of functionalism) and has argued that this version of dispositionalism escapes Boghossian’s ‘circularity problem’. Miller argues, nonetheless, that another of Boghossian’s criticisms of dispositionalism, ‘the infinity problem’, still applies to this ‘ultra-sophisticated dispositionalism’: C will still draw upon a potential infinity of mediating background clusters of belief. The present paper argues that the feature that ‘the infinity problem’ presents as problematic is a feature of a host of familiar explanations. Our fundamental difficulty in this area is not our inability to understand how a more general model can be applied to a particular domain (the intentional understood as dispositional) but our failure to understand that general model itself (dispositional explanation).

Paul Boghossian has claimed that the holistic character of the intentional presents insoluble problems for dispositional theories of meaning, the reason being that ‘just about any stimulus can cause just about any belief, given a suitably mediating set of background assumptions’ (Boghossian, 1989, p. 539). In its most basic form, a dispositional theory of meaning identifies my meaning *x* by the symbol ‘*x*’ with my having a disposition to apply ‘*x*’ to cases of *x*. If, instead, I was disposed to apply ‘*x*’ to cases of *y*, then, according to this basic formulation, ‘*x*’ would refer to *ys*.¹ However, refinements are necessary because this basic form of dispositional theory fails to recognize the looseness of fit between what I perceive and what I am liable to say. For example, I may say of a small piece of green plastic, ‘Here is Professor Plum’; after staring at my tea-leaves, I may pronounce, ‘No one can catch United’; and after glancing at a cathode-ray tube, ‘The news is on’. It would appear that it is

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¹ A similar account can be offered as an analysis of the content of intentional mental states such as belief. A basic dispositional account of belief would suggest that a particular token can be identified with belief that *p* if and only if a person is disposed to possess that token when confronted with *p*.

only under certain conditions that someone who means *x* by 'x' will utter 'x' when in the presence of an *x* and, if a dispositional theory is to be plausible, it must give some account of those conditions.

Crucially, it appears, such an account will need to mention a host of other intentional facts, including, for example, beliefs that the person has or does not have. But if a dispositional theory is to offer an analysis of what such intentional facts are, can its own formulation invoke such facts? Is there not a species of circularity here? One very plausible specification of the dispositionalist's aim is that of 'identify[ing] someone's meaning such and such with facts of the form: *S is disposed to utter P under conditions C*, where the *C* are to be specified nonsemantically and nonintentionally' (Miller 1997, p. 2). Boghossian argues that the holistic character of belief fixation renders impossible the dispositionalist's hope of giving a specification of *C* that, firstly, does not draw on semantical or intentional notions and, secondly, is finitely long.

Alex Miller has argued that, by drawing on the work of David Lewis, one can formulate a dispositional theory which will accommodate the problem of circularity but that this formulation is still flawed as it still cannot be finitely stated. I will argue that the problem here identified is not peculiar to dispositional accounts of content and that the standard that such accounts here fail to meet may not have the uncontentious authority supposed. The apparently ineliminable role played by *ceteris paribus* clauses in scientific explanations suggests that those explanations also cannot be finitely formulated in the way that critics of a dispositional theory of meaning insist the latter must be in order to be acceptable. In other words, the standard by reference to which we may have hoped to distinguish dispositional theories of meaning from respectable forms of explanation is one which paradigm cases of the latter cannot meet either. Hence, we must recognize that the feature identified either does not constitute a flaw in dispositional theories of meaning or constitutes a flaw in a host of other previously accepted analyses. Either way, we have failed to identify a problem which is peculiar to dispositional theories of meaning. We have instead uncovered a more general unclarity in our thinking about dispositions and theoretical terms and perhaps a more specific but general problem with Lewis-style analyses.

Boghossian's Circularity Problem states that the dispositionalist's specification of *C* will have to make reference to, among other things, the person's other beliefs. This problem is clearly related to that which, in the philosophy of mind, undermined certain types of behaviourism and inspired brands of functionalism (cf. Crane, 1995, pp. 51–2). Miller has recently suggested an 'ultra-sophisticated dispositionalism' which models itself upon David Lewis's well-known version of functionalism (Miller, 1998, pp. 183–9). At its most abstract, Lewis's procedure (which has become known as Ramsification, due to its anticipation by F.P. Ramsey) is to define certain terms by the role that they play within a theory. To say that there is an entity corresponding to that term is to say that there exists something which fulfils the role that that theory

specifies for that term. Lewis illustrates this procedure with a memorable example:

We are assembled in the drawing room of the country house; the detective reconstructs the crime. That is, he proposes a *theory* designed to be the best explanation of phenomena we have observed: the death of Mr Body, the blood on the wallpaper, the silence of the dog in the night, the clock seventeen minutes fast, and so on. He launches into his story:

X, Y and Z conspired to murder Mr Body. Seventeen years ago, in the gold fields of Uganda, X was Body's partner . . . Last week, Y and Z conferred in a bar in Reading . . . Tuesday night at 11:17, Y went to the attic and set a time bomb . . . Seventeen minutes later, X met Z in the billiard room and gave him the lead pipe . . . Just when the bomb went off in the attic, X fired three shots into the study through the French windows . . .

And so the story goes: a long story. . . . In telling his story, the detective set forth three roles and said that they were occupied by X, Y and Z. He must have specified the meanings of the three [theoretical] terms 'X', 'Y' and 'Z' thereby; for they had meanings afterwards, they had none before, and nothing else was done to give them meanings. They were introduced by an implicit functional definition, being reserved to name the occupants of three roles. (Lewis, 1991, pp. 204–5)²

Terms introduced in this way can be defined by reference to other terms so introduced (by their own role within the theory, whose specification may include reference to our first term, and so on). If one attempted to define these terms one by one, one would run into trouble if it turned out that they were mutually inter-defined (as 'X', 'Y' and 'Z' are and intentional terms and many theoretical terms appear to be). But if instead the meaning of all of the terms is fixed simultaneously by their role within the theory as a whole, no such problem is encountered and their mutual inter-definition no longer generates a vicious circularity. By suggesting that this is the way in which the identity of intentional states can be fixed (the theory being made up of the truths that we take to hold of intentional states), we can derive definitions of intentional states that are not undermined by their mutual definition. We can specify an intentional state as, for example, a state produced by the presence of a certain phenomenon (the state's 'content'), subject to certain conditions holding, among which are the presence or absence of other intentional states specified in the same way. The meaning of all of the intentional terms is then

² This paper was originally published in 1972 in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, but page references are to the 1991 reprint in D.M. Rosenthal (ed.), *The Nature of Mind*.

fixed simultaneously by their role within the theory as a whole and, Miller has argued, this will circumvent Boghossian's Circularity Problem.

This perspective on intentional states suggests that we treat them in the same way we handle theoretical postulates. We introduce electrons, protons and neutrons, say, all partly by reference to each other and yet do not thereby produce viciously circular explanations. Lewis then provides a particular account of how this might be done, of how our handling of theoretical postulates may avoid a vicious circularity. But Miller has argued that Boghossian's second criticism of dispositionalism casts doubt upon the use of such an analysis as an analysis of intentional terms. Any particular intentional state is identified with a disposition, a disposition which is specified partly by reference to the web of mediating beliefs affecting whether that disposition arises or manifests itself. But according to Boghossian, 'there looks to be a potential infinity of such mediating background clusters of belief' (Boghossian, 1990, p. 79). How then can we produce our specification of the disposition to be identified with a particular intentional state? The Lewis-style analysis can make room for this disposition to make reference to other intentional states, but can it accommodate reference to an infinity of such states? Surely this means that the disposition cannot really be specified. I will refer to this as the Infinity Problem.

What I wish to argue here is that although Lewis's model of theoretical terms may turn out to be mistaken (perhaps that is what we should really be learning from Boghossian's second criticism), the underlying intuition that we treat intentional terms just like any other theoretical terms may still stand. The feature that the Infinity Problem presents as problematic is a feature of a host of perfectly respectable explanations and is not a peculiarity of the attempt to understand the intentional as dispositional. Thus Boghossian and Miller may be expecting the dispositionalist in the philosophy of language to meet a standard of adequacy in explanation that it is actually unreasonable to expect any comparable explanation to meet. If the problem that Boghossian raises is a problem for a Lewis-style analysis of the intentional, it will be so across the board for Lewis-style analyses of all sorts of theoretical terms.

Boghossian seems to show that there is no exhaustively specifiable list of conditions under which particular beliefs or utterances will be produced. But explanations elsewhere surely suffer from a parallel difficulty. Elsewhere in philosophy, this 'problem' surfaces as the ineliminability of *ceteris paribus* clauses. The need to delimit the authority of our explanations by an 'all other things being equal' clause is actually epidemic in perfectly respectable areas of science. This need seems to render it impossible to allocate to a whole host of explanations precise statements of exactly which observable states they may explain. As Fodor puts it, 'what is alleged about the implicit reliance of commonsense psychology on uncashed *ceteris paribus* clauses is in fact a perfectly general property of the *explicit* generalizations in *all* the special sciences' (Fodor, 1987, p. 4). Intentional systems are not closed systems, inasmuch as it always seems to be possible to think of another eventuality that might jeopardize a particular

prediction that one might make about how that system will behave. But how often can the supposedly respectable sciences claim to be dealing with genuinely closed systems either? Back to Fodor:

Consider the following modest truth of geology: A meandering river erodes its outside bank. 'False or vacuous'; so a philosopher might argue. 'Take it straight—as a strictly universal generalization—and it is surely false. Think of the case where the weather changes and the river freezes; or the world comes to an end; or somebody builds a concrete wall on the outside bank; or the rain stops and the river dries up . . . or whatever. You can, of course, defend its generalization in the usual way—by appending a *ceteris paribus* clause: 'All else being equal, a meandering river erodes its outside bank.' But perhaps this last means nothing more than: 'A meandering river erodes its outside bank—unless it doesn't.' That, of course, is predictively adequate for sure. Nothing that happens will disconfirm it; nothing that happens could. (Fodor, 1987, pp. 4–5)

As Fodor concludes, 'Patently, something has gone wrong'. It seems that we have latched on to a standard of specification that a host of apparently respectable explanations cannot meet.³ But if so, it is not a problem peculiar to a dispositionalist rendering of intentional explanation that it cannot meet that standard.

According to Boghossian, a dispositional account of what it is for a person to have grasped the concept, 'magpie', will eventually run into the difficulty that 'there is no finite way to state what beliefs the [dispositionalist] must exclude before he may be assured of the desired concomitance of magpie beliefs and magpies' (Boghossian, 1990, p. 81). But far more general facts about the looseness of fit between observables and underlying dispositions, between evidence and theory, seem to render impossible a finite specification of where and when the possession of a disposition will result in its manifestation, of where and when the presence of a theoretical entity will cause the observable events that it is invoked to explain. The conditions under which a meandering river erodes its outside bank do not constitute a finite list and this kind of indeterminacy may well be characteristic of all sorts of explanation, rather than being a problem peculiarly associated with the attempt to understand the intentional dispositionally. Among the platitudes that Miller includes in the Lewis-style analysis of colours is 'the property of being red causes us, under certain circumstances, to have experiences of the property of redness' (Miller, 1997, p. 4). Irrespective of whether that is indeed a platitude, the crucial question

³ Fodor considers the possibility that 'our most basic science' might (p. 226) but, if so, no human being may ever have produced a legitimate explanation (for reasons made clear by Crane and Mellor, 1990).

here is: can we give a finite specification of the truth conditions of even a claim such as that? The answer seems to be 'No': there appears to be an indefinitely large number of different eventualities that might intervene to prevent something's being red causing us to have experiences of the property of redness.⁴

If Lewis-style accounts are committed to the idea of a *complete* specification of how a particular theoretical postulate will affect observable phenomena,⁵ Boghossian's Infinity Problem suggests that a Lewis-style account of the intentional will fail. But my point is that if such an account fails, it does so because of what it seems to share with Lewis-style accounts of the theoretical more generally. If so, it may still be possible to preserve the original insight, that intentional terms are used just as theoretical terms are. Although Lewis's particular account of how theoretical terms are defined may have led us astray, his basic intuition that intentional terms are used just as theoretical terms are may still hold water. In the light of our doubts about the Lewis-style analysis, we may have no very clear idea of how theoretical terms are used. But we still have no reason to think that intentional terms are any less well-behaved than theoretical terms. How they do what they do may remain unclear to us. But what they do, complete with their own Circularity and Infinity Problems, seems to be rather similar to what intentional terms do.

Forbes and Blackburn have both suggested that criticisms of dispositionalist accounts of meaning attack such accounts on the basis of what are really problems with the very idea of a disposition (Forbes, 1984; Blackburn, 1984). This, I would suggest, is also true of Boghossian's Circularity and Infinity Problems. The circularity in the specification of the intentional and the impossibility of a finite unpacking of the implications of an intentional ascription are features which other apparently respectable dispositional explanations share. Dispo-

⁴ In the intentional case, there appear to be an infinity of *intentional* states that might affect whether or not a particular intentional state arises or whether or not a particular intentional state has a particular affect. It might then be argued that this case differs from the other cases of explanation cited because the intervening events are among those which our Lewis-style analysis was meant to be specifying. If sound, this argument would suggest that the Infinity Problem ultimately collapses into a variant of the Circularity Problem. But it is not obvious that the argument is sound, in as much as it is still unclear that the feature it highlights really is a peculiarity of the intentional case. That a river erodes a particular bank depends upon the actions of other real or possible rivers and other real or possible geological phenomena characterised partly by their relation to the action of rivers. That an electron produces a particular effect depends upon its interaction with an indefinite number of other real or possible electrons and with an indefinite number of other real or possible sub-atomic particles characterised partly by their relation to the action of electrons.

⁵ Lewis's own presentation of Ramsification is not that clear on this count. But Miller has certainly taken a finite specification to be necessary (at least in the case of Ramsification of the intentional) (Miller, 1997, pp. 25–8) and it is notable that Rey's presentation of Lewis's view builds into the Ramsification recipe the line 'Enrich [your] theory so that you are satisfied that it includes *every* claim you regard as constitutive of the application of any of the [terms to be introduced]' (Rey, 1997, p. 173; italics added).

sitionalists present us with a certain account of what meaning ascriptions are. So understood, meaning ascriptions are then subject to criticism. But the criticism is that they fail to meet expectations which, in fact, ordinary non-intentional explanations cannot meet either. A problem peculiar to dispositional renderings of intentional explanation proves elusive.

I have only scratched the surface of some of the difficult issues involved here, issues concerning what kind of explanation the postulation of a disposition is meant to provide, as well as issues concerning the relation of disposition to manifestation and of theory to evidence.⁶ But it does, at least, appear that Boghossian's criticisms of dispositionalism rely upon some questionable assumptions about how other modes of explanation work and what standards of specificity they attain. In other words, his observations reveal problems specific to dispositional accounts of the intentional, only 'given a suitably mediating set of background assumptions'.

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⁶ For example, I have not attempted to determine whether the other forms of explanation that seem to manifest an Infinity Problem (just like that which Boghossian presents as a peculiar failure of the intentional understood as the dispositional) do so because they rest ultimately on dispositional properties or on theoretically postulated properties. I am unsure whether one or the other can claim to be, in some sense, the fundamentally relevant feature here.