



THE QUA-PROBLEM, MEANING SCEPTICISM, AND THE LIFE-WORLD

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We present to our readers the article published in the *Husserl Studies* journal (by Springer) on May 29, 2020.

Abstract

Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny (Language and reality: An introduction to the philosophy of language. MIT Press, Cambridge, 1999) argue that the pure causal theory of reference faces a problem, which they call the qua-problem. They propose to invoke intentional states to cope with it. Martin Kusch (A sceptical guide to meaning and rules. Acumen, Chesham, 2006), however, argues that, because Devitt and Sterelny invoke intentional states to solve the problem, their causal-hybrid theory of reference is susceptible to Kripke's sceptical attack. Kusch thinks that intentional states are what allows the sceptic to get a foothold and thus interpret words in a weird way. In his view, Kripke is therefore correct in not regarding a causal theory as a solution to the problem. I think, however, that there is room to defend a causal-hybrid theory of reference. Drawing on Husserl's notion of the life-world, I argue that this notion is helpful for overcoming some aspects of the qua-problem and the meaning scepticism which Devitt and Sterelny's causal-hybrid theory of reference faces.

1. Introduction: The qua-Problem

Devitt and Sterelny (1999) argue that the pure causal theory of reference championed by Kripke and Putnam faces a problem, which they call the qua-problem. According to this problem, in order for a grounder to fix the reference of a term, causal contact between the grounder and the referent is not sufficient.

The problem has three important aspects. The first aspect concerns the fact that the grounder never has a full causal contact with the referent. In perceptual causal contact, the grounder can perceive a referent only from a certain perspective. Devitt and Sterelny explain this aspect of the problem when they consider proper names. Suppose, they say, that we name our pet 'Nana'. As we name the pet, we do not have causal contact with "all of Nana", because we see only a certain part of her. Moreover, we have causal contact with her only for a certain brief period of her life. Yet we intend that the whole Nana is to be the referent of 'Nana'. Hence, the following question should be answered: "In virtue of what was the grounding in the whole Nana, not in a time-slice or undetached part of her?" (Devitt and Sterelny 1999, p. 79).

This aspect of the qua-problem concerns natural

kind terms as well, though Devitt and Sterelny do not consider it explicitly in this respect. Whenever we encounter a sample of a natural kind, we have only partial causal contact with that sample. While grounding, say, the term 'tree', the contact is not with all of a tree sample, either temporally or spatially, because we always perceive trees only from a certain perspective for a brief period of their life.

The second important aspect of the qua-problem concerns the fact that any sample which is present in the grounding process is a member of many natural kinds. That is to say, while grounding a term, the grounder has causal contact with many kinds of entities. Suppose, for example, that a grounder introduces the term 'human' by saying that "This is a human". Since any human is a member of different natural kinds (Hominidae, Primate, Mammalia, etc.), the following question arises: Which of these natural kinds is the reference of 'human'?

The third aspect of the qua-problem bears on non-referring terms. Suppose, Devitt and Sterelny say, that the term grounders are wrong about what they name; Nana is not a cat but a robot. Or maybe there was nothing in front of them; they were just hallucinating in the "grounding" ceremony. Obviously, in these cases the grounding should fail. But in virtue of what

does the term fail to refer?

The qua-problem, for Devitt and Sterelny, is a good reason to amend the purecausal theory of reference. They propose intentional states to cope with this problem. In their view, what enables one to fix the reference is not only causal contact between the grounders and the referent, but causal contact plus the intentional states of the grounders (their theory is therefore called a causal-hybrid theory of reference). According to this theory, the name 'Nana' picks out the whole object because "the grounder must, at some level, 'think of the cause of his experience under some general categorical term like 'animal' or 'material object'" (Devitt and Sterelny 1999, p. 80).

Devitt and Sterelny offer the same approach, when it comes to the second aspect of the problem. For them, the term 'human' picks up a human qua being a human, because the term grounder has a certain intentional state which rules out irrelevant kinds such as Hominidae or Mammalia: "[i]t seems that something about the mental state of the grounder must determine which putative nature of a sample is the one relevant to the grounding" (Devitt and Sterelny 1999, p. 91).

Moreover, concerning non-referring terms, Devitt and Sterelny maintain that the grounding of such terms will fail because the referent has no relevant nature that could be determined by the intentional states of the grounders. If Nana turned out to be a robot, the grounding of the name 'Nana' would fail because the grounders have the belief that Nana is a cat – a belief that would not correspond to reality

2. Kripke's Meaning Scepticism and the Causal-Hybrid Theory of Reference

Ingenious though Devitt and Sterelny's proposal is, it has its own drawback. As Kusch (2006) argues, the requirement that the grounder of the term have an intentional state which is responsible for the grounding is susceptible to the sceptical challenge. Much of this challenge has to do with Kripke's ideas about meaning scepticism, which also concern the view that words refer to particular individuals or kinds. So let me digress a moment to consider his view on this issue.

Kripke (1982), building upon Wittgenstein's insights, develops an argument to show that there is a reason to doubt the existence of meaning, because we find no facts about it. He explains his argument on the basis of an arithmetic calculation. It is well-known that we often employ addition in order to produce the sum of two or more numbers. We are able to do this once we have grasped the function of addition. But, of course, it is impossible for us to do all possible additions. Suppose that a man who has not done the

addition '68 + 57' before encounters a bizarre sceptic who asks him "What is 68 plus 57?" After a quick calculation, the man arrives at '125'. The answer, of course, is correct, but the sceptic responds that, given the man's past use of the term 'plus', the correct answer should be '5'. To this weird response, the man answers that "plus' as [he] intended to use the word in the past, denoted a function which, when applied to the numbers [he] called '68' and '57,' yields the value 125" (Kripke 1982, p. 8). Yet the sceptic says that the man might mean another function by 'plus', which he calls 'quaddition'. Quaddition (or "the quus function") is like addition in that, as a function, it yields the same values when it applies to all pairs of numbers that the man calculated in the past. But the distinction between them is that quaddition yields the value '5' for all pairs of numbers that the man has not considered. And because there is no fact of the matter whether the man meant plus, not quus, the sceptic might claim that the man is misinterpreting his previous use of 'plus', and that he always meant quus by 'plus'.

The causal-hybrid theory of reference championed by Devitt and Sterelny would indeed be a good way to overcome the sceptical challenge, at least when it comes to the terms whose referents are not abstract entities like mathematical objects. For this theory postulates a causal chain that leads from the word to the referent, and could therefore rule out possible sceptical interpretations. However, in trying to solve the qua-problem, Devitt and Sterelny invoke intentional states which should individuate the relevant cause, and the trouble here is that, as Kusch puts it, "once such intentional states are part of the story, the sceptic can run his usual arguments" (Kusch 2006, p. 134). This is because the intentional states of the grounder which are relevant to the term grounding do not constrain all possible sceptical interpretations of the word.

Let me explicate this claim by using a natural kind term as an example. If the grounder, introducing the term 'human' before 2020, says "This is a human" and has an intentional state with the content that this term picks up this sample as a member of the human kind, then the sceptic might suggest an interpretation of 'human' which refers to a humcat, where a humcat is either a human if encountered before 2020 or a cat if encountered after 2020. According to this interpretation, 'human' should be applied to humans before 2020, and to cats from 2020 onwards. The sceptic's reason for such a weird interpretation is that, since the grounder has never had the possibility of applying 'human' to humans after 2020, there is no fact of the matter whether he previously meant human, not humcat. So the sceptic might claim that the grounder is misinterpreting his use of 'human', and that he means humcat by 'human'.

Notice that to provide instruction by saying that 'human' refers to a unique natural kind would not save the situation. For if the grounder were to respond that 'human' refers to a unique natural kind, then the sceptic might suggest that by 'unique natural kind' he meant a unique natural kind, where that expression applies to a kind spread over the time-slices of two kinds. In this vein, the sceptic can easily respond by giving a weird interpretation for any instruction, because instructions contain as much as the expression whose understanding they are assumed to support. And of course, such a chain of instructions can create a vicious regress.

So it seems that there is no way to save the causal-hybrid theory of reference: if we take out intentional states, we will face the qua-problem; but if we invoke them, the theory will be open to sceptical attack.

It is interesting to note in this regard that, after considering some other possible solutions (none of which, on his view, is able to refute the sceptic), Kripke himself held that the sceptical challenge could be overcome by a "sceptical solution", which boils down to the following idea: Though there is no fact in favor of the existence of meaning, we actually mean something by words. This solution created a huge debate which, however, I will not consider in this paper. What is interesting in Kripke's search for a solution to the sceptical challenge is that he regards the causal theory of reference as incapable of solving the problem, though he is one of the founders of this theory. Kusch defends Kripke's decision concerning this issue, also holding that Devitt and Sterelny's theory of reference is vulnerable to the sceptical challenge because it postulates intentional states to overcome the qua-problem. For this reason, Kusch maintains that Kripke is correct in not regarding the causal or causal-hybrid theory as a solution to the problem.

However, I think that there is room to defend a causal-hybrid theory of reference. In what follows, I will make use of Husserl's notion of the life-world to argue that it is possible to overcome some aspects of the qua-problem and the meaning scepticism which Devitt and Sterelny's theory of reference faces.

3. Husserl's Notion of the Life-World

It is useful to introduce the notion of life-world by comparing it with our scientific notion of world. According to our scientific notion of world, the world has indefinitely many properties; it contains quarks, electrons, strings, planets, galaxies, or many other unknown entities that are discoverable (or maybe undiscoverable) via a rigorous and empirical scientific scrutiny. However, people in their daily lives do not usually experience the world as having

these features. Here we deal with relatively restricted number of properties. I see an entity in front of me, and this entity shows up for me as a table. I usually regard this table not as an entity made up from quarks, electrons, etc., but as an entity which has a smooth surface and four legs, and which I can use for such and such mundane purposes. Let me take another example. As part of nature, water has indefinitely many features, such as having quarks and electrons, being suitable for hydration reaction etc. But, in our life-world, we mainly ascribe limited features to water – such as being thirst-quenching, liquidity, transparency – features which, by and large, seem to us to be independent of the features scientists take it to have. So, the life-world is the world in which we human beings experience the world and structure it into objects in some way.

Some lifeworldly properties are very general, in the sense that they belong to each human life-world. For example, we experience things around us as having a whole body in the three dimensional space. When we see a tree, for instance, or house we expect that, as material objects, they have other sides that are hidden from our perspective; we ascribe to such objects the general property of being a spatial object. Nevertheless, some of lifeworldly properties are relatively specific in comparison to such very general properties. For we encounter things in the world not only as material and spatiotemporal objects, but also as living things (animals or humans) and cultural objects such as cups, books, pens, etc.

An important aspect of the life-world is intimately related our perception of the world. Husserl conceives of the life-world not only as a world with all its cultural entities, but also as a perceptual world, which comprises perceptual objects without cultural and practical specifications. The life-world, for him, is first of all a world which is "given through perception"; it is a perceptual world comprising sensible objects. Therefore, to understand the life-world, we need to understand how the world is given to us through perception.

Husserl stresses that perception itself consists in many different phases. We can see, touch, and smell the same object, but in each case we have something different. On the other hand, each of these perceptual modes is complex. For instance, when we see an object, we perceive it from a certain perspective; we cannot see its hidden sides. The hidden sides can be seen by changing our perspective, but in this case the former sides of the object will not be given to us. Nevertheless, for Husserl, this does not mean that we do not perceive the whole object. He holds that seeing means "more than it offers", because "in seeing [we] always 'mean' [the object] with all the sides which are in no way given to [us]" (1970, p. 158). Thus,

according to Husserl, the unseen sides of the object are also co-intended in some way.

Another important feature of the life-world, for Husserl, is its intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity here means that the life-world is not a world of a single subject but a world of many people. It is not the case that only I or you perceive objects in the way described above. Others also perceive the world in the same manner. The lifeworld is an “intersubjectively identical” universal field where “all ego-subjects [...] are oriented toward a common world and the things in it” (Husserl 1970, p. 172). That is to say, we apprehend objects as having certain properties in the course of lifeworldly intersubjective processes. Therefore, for Husserl, the life-world is not an unjustified world of a solipsistic subject, but rather the “world for all”.

An essential feature of the life-world stressed by Husserl is its pregivenness. The life-world is primarily considered to be pregiven in relation to science. Husserl regards the life-world as always “on hand”, already there for the scientist, before or while she starts to do her job. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the life-world is pregiven not only in relation to science, but also in relation to all different sorts of activities, including term grounding (which I will return to below). Husserl writes: “All opinions, justified or unjustified, popular, superstitious, scientific, all relate to the already pregiven world” (Hua XIII, p. 196). So, the life-world is to be regarded as a universal field, and its pregivenness as a more general feature “which includes all our goals”, whether scientific or non-scientific (Husserl 1970, p. 144).

Let me now sum up the important features of the life-world mentioned in this section: the life-world is a world encountered by members of different social groups or linguistic communities and is structured by them into objects with (mundane) properties; it contains different sorts of properties, including very general properties, such as being a spatiotemporal object, and more specific properties, such as being a certain cultural or practical object; the life-world is perceptual, intersubjective, and pregiven.

With these important features of the life-world in mind, let us now turn to the issue of term grounding and the qua-problem.

4. Term Grounding, the qua-Problem and the Life-World

The above-mentioned features of the life-world bear on language and the process of term grounding as part of it, mostly because the life-world is also the world of a linguistic community. This suggests that whenever the term grounder decides to ground a term,

there is already a pregiven and intersubjective life-world with its fixed conditions, and that the grounding process itself is embedded in them. And, as I will argue, the lifeworldly conditions enable us to overcome the qua-problem in such a way that a causal-hybrid theory of reference avoids meaning scepticism.

To explicate this view, let me first focus on the first aspect of the qua-problem. To recall: this aspect of the problem was that the member of a kind which is present in the grounding process has only a partial, not whole, causal contact with the grounder. As noted, Devitt and Sterelny introduce intentional states to overcome this problem. They hold that “there must be something about the mental state of the grounder that makes it the case that the [term] is grounded in the cause of the perceptual experience qua whole object” (1999, p. 80). But the question is: What kind of mental state is this mental (or intentional) state? Devitt and Sterelny do not specify it. Nevertheless, they might agree with us if we suggest that the intentional states involved in the grounding process are the belief that things have whole bodies and the corresponding intention that this term (say, ‘human’) picks up this sample as having a whole (human) body. Yet notice once again that whenever we invoke intentional states, the sceptic might run his unusual interpretations. In this case, he might pose the following question: What makes it so that in grounding the term ‘human’, the grounder did not mean the following: “This is a human; but the term ‘human’ applies to this kind of whole entity until 2020 after which it is to be transferred to the kind of entity which consists of a whole human body and any other body which is nearest to the human body in question (call this *qrwhole* body)”?

A Husserlian might initially respond that this difficulty can be overcome by recalling the perceptual character of the life-world. Because of what lifeworldly perception is like, he might say, the sceptic has no grounds for interpreting the meaning of ‘human’ in such a deviant way. Our perceptual system does not carve up the world in the way the sceptic’s interpretation suggests. The ordinary Husserlian response, then, would be to say that we perceive objects not as having a *qrwhole* body but a whole body, because when we see the sample from a certain perspective, we co-intend (be it unseen or not) only the sides of the sample, but not additionally the sides of another body which is nearest to the sample.

However, as in the case of ‘human’ described above, the Husserlian has never had the possibility of seeing bodies after, say, 2020. And relying on this point, the sceptic might reply that there is no fact of the matter whether the Husserlian will not co-intend the sides of the nearest body after 2020. Therefore, it

seems that perception alone cannot block the sceptic's attack.

Yet the Husserlian has another weapon in his arsenal to defend himself. In order to explain why by 'human' we mean a whole object rather than as a quwhole one, he might mention that objects perceived by a subject can be perceived by others in the same way, and that perception in this sense is an intersubjective process. So even if the sceptic expressed a doubt as to whether the Husserlian would continue to perceive objects as whole after 2020, the latter might appeal to perceptions of others. In other words, the Husserlian might hold that others would continue to perceive objects as whole, and that what guarantees that by 'human' we mean a whole object is that it is a whole object for anyone, not just for him.

In response, however, the sceptic might put forward a weirder idea. He might say that there is no fact of the matter whether, in the future, every member of a society will not perceive things as a quwhole body. After all, he might continue, it is a contingent fact that we see the world as having whole bodies; a strange community which sees objects as consisting of a quwhole body is also conceivable.

This is, I think, the last argument which the sceptic could use in favor his view. However, there is room for the Husserlian to meet this challenge as well. The Husserlian might agree that our lifeworldly conditions change from time to time, and that, though perceptual conditions are firmer in this respect, they are not unshakeable either; the more fundamental perceptual conditions could also have been different. Yet the point here is that even in that case we would have had a certain lifeworld with its conditions functioning in the background. That is to say, regardless of how the lifeworldly conditions are, or will be in the future, at any given moment of term grounding, we do necessarily have a certain pregiven life-world. And, in fact, term grounding is embedded in this life-world in such a way that its conditions, while functioning in the background, enable the term to pick out the object as whole.

Now, the moral we can draw from this is as follows. If there is always a lifeworld functioning in the background for the process of term grounding, then we do not need to invoke any intentional state – such as the belief that things have a whole body or the intention that this term picks up this sample as having a whole (human) body – in order for the term to pick out the whole object. Although the term grounder has partial causal contact with the referent, the perceptual lifeworldly condition fills the gap. Similarly, in the imaginary case where people perceive objects as having a quwhole body, we would not need to invoke the belief that things have a quwhole body or the corresponding referential intention, because in that

case the corresponding perceptual (lifeworldly) condition would do the job. Therefore, given that there is always a life-world with background conditions that support any term grounding, we do not face the first aspect of the qua-problem.

We also avoid meaning scepticism, since the appeal to a life-world stops the regress in the interpretation. The meanings of words are rooted in a life-world that functions as ultimate background conditions for any kind of linguistic activity. And the sceptic's deviant interpretations are not justified, because they do not fit these conditions. It is true that, if these conditions changed, the meanings of words would also change. However, in that case too, we would again have a life-world that would offer itself as the ultimate background of a correct interpretation.

Let us now turn to the second aspect of the qua-problem. The problem was that the term 'human' must be grounded in a way that makes it clear that it applies to the sample as being a member of one particular kind (human), but not qua member of, say, Mammalia. To overcome this difficulty, let us remember the above-mentioned aspect of the life-world which bears on the fact that, in our daily life, objects show up as having certain (lifeworldly) properties. For example, we usually apprehend water not as consisting of H₂O molecules (i.e. as it is apprehended in the science), but as having properties such as transparency, liquidity, being thirst-quenching, etc. which are salient for us in our daily life. This suggests that some objects are already known to us in the context of our life-world before science, or any other kind of activity such as term grounding, comes into play; we already apprehend these entities as having certain properties. Before or while grounding the term 'human', we also apprehend a human as having certain (lifeworldly) properties. It is difficult to specify them. The point here, however, is that prior to all other ways of apprehending a human (e.g. regarding him as a member of Mammalia or of Chordata), and independent of them, we are concerned with humans in our pregiven life-world. There we ascribe to them the property of being human which, of course, is distinct from the property of being a mammal. In our life-world, while applying 'human', we regard the referent of this term to be a human not because he at the same time happens to be a mammal or a chordate, but because of its humanness. On the other hand, the lifeworldly property of being human points to the

underlying natural joint which characterizes the sample only as a human (this joint might be the specific chromosome pairs carried by human cells or any other feature that uniquely characterizes the *Homo sapiens* species). The lifeworldly property in question does not point to the other alleged joints that characterize the sample as being a mammal or a chordate, because even if there were such joints, they would not be responsible for producing the property of being human. Therefore, although there might be such joints in nature, these alternatives are ruled out as references of 'human'.

Finally, the concept of the life-world can be used to explain non-referring terms as well (the third aspect of the qua-problem). In a case of reference failure, the grounding fails either because there is no relevant nature which should be fixed by lifeworldly conditions (as in hallucinatory cases), or because, though there might be some causal contact with certain natural joints (like the illusory cat-robot case), the lifeworldly conditions of the grounder do not fit them (in his life-world Nana has never shown up for

the grounder as a robot).

5. Conclusion

Drawing on Husserl's notion of the life-world, I argued that it is possible to overcome some aspects of the qua-problem in such a way that Kripke's meaning scepticism does not plague a causal-hybrid theory of reference. Regardless of what scenarios the sceptic imagines, there are intersubjective lifeworldly conditions shared by all members of the linguistic community, and all different weird interpretations which the sceptic proposes are excluded because of these conditions. Furthermore, against a life-world with its fixed conditions, there is no need to appeal to the intentional states of term grounders in order to solve the qua-problem, because the lifeworldly conditions are already built right into the grounding process. The life-world in this sense is the condition of possibility of term grounding, which, together with causal contact with a sample, makes it possible to individuate the referent.

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