

PUTTING METAPHYSICS FIRST:  
A RESPONSE TO JAMES TOMBERLIN  
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The naturalism that underlies my book Coming to Our Senses (1996) is an epistemological thesis: "there is only one way of knowing, the empirical way that is the basis of science (whatever that way may be)" (p. 2). This does not imply actualism, nor any other metaphysical doctrine. Still, James Tomberlin is right - in "Naturalism, Actualism, and Ontology" (###) - to think that I adhere to actualism. So I face his two neatly constructed challenges: "Challenge One," to give an actualist semantics that is otherwise satisfactory in his deontic case (p. 3); "Challenge Two," to do the same in his case involving intentional verbs (p.12).

In response, I shall first indicate why I am an actualist in semantics. Second, I shall answer Challenge Two. I shall not answer Challenge One because I do not know how to. The best I can say is that, given what I have argued about actualism in general, we must seek a semantics for the deontic sentences that complies with actualism.

### Actualism

Four methodological proposals are central to the argument in Coming. The last of these proposals is that our investigations in semantics should be guided by the slogan, "Put metaphysics first" (pp. 83-4): we should give a certain temporal and explanatory priority to metaphysical concerns (p. 208). My earlier book, Realism and Truth (1991) is, in effect, an extended naturalistic argument for this proposal. From the naturalistic perspective, a semantic theory can have no privileged status (of the sort given it by Michael Dummett and Hilary Putnam, for example): it is just one empirical theory among many of the world we live in. Indeed, given the insecure and speculative nature of semantics at this time, the relative epistemic status of any semantic theory must be low. So it is exactly the wrong starting place for deriving a general metaphysics. Rather, we should approach semantics armed with a metaphysics abstracted from our most secure common-sense and scientific theories of physical reality. I argue that this metaphysics should be a realist one. And I have argued briefly elsewhere that it should also be an actualist one (Devitt and Sterelny 1987: 31-2). To think otherwise is, in my view, to show "a failure of that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies" (Russell 1919: 169). Now it is of course possible that a semantic theory could justify our abandoning this realist and actualist metaphysics, but it is surely very unlikely. The support for this metaphysics outside semantics

is so strong that it is scarcely conceivable that a semantic theory should overturn it. So, when presented with a nonactualist solution to a semantic problem, the rational strategy is to reject it and keep looking for an actualist solution.

In Coming, my commitment to putting metaphysics first in doing semantics takes me further (pp. 208-10).<sup>1</sup> Meanings are relational properties of tokens in speech and thought, most notably referential properties. We should expect these properties to be explained in terms of relations to objects that we already believe in for reasons independent of semantics. For, it is hard to see how a token's relation to a special semantic entity can help explain the token's role in nonsemantic reality: its role in explaining behavior and serving as a guide to that reality. So, I argue, we should not posit Platonic propositions to explain the semantics of attitude ascriptions.

Against this background, my response to Tomberlin's Challenge One is: I do not know the actualist answer to the challenge but we must keep looking for one. I think that I can do better in response to Challenge Two.

### Intentional Verbs

I subscribes to the representational theory of the mind and to the language of thought hypothesis. So I take a belief to be a functional relation to a mental sentence token with a certain meaning. Drawing on the classic discussion of belief ascriptions generated by Quine, Coming argues that

(B) Ralph believes that Ortcutt is a spy

is ambiguous, being sometimes opaque and sometimes transparent. In both cases, of course, (B) ascribes the functional relation appropriate for a belief, but (B) varies in the meaning it ascribes to the mental sentence that must stand in that relation for (B) to be true. In the opaque case, (B) ascribes a meaning which, so far as the sentence's singular term is concerned, is the property of purportedly referring to Ortcutt by the mode of 'Ortcutt'; in the transparent case, it ascribes the property of simply referring to Ortcutt (pp. 140-54).

I think that we should follow Quine (1960: 151-6) in thinking that sentences involving intentional verbs like "search for" should be treated similarly to attitude ascriptions.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Tomberlin's sentence

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<sup>1</sup> See also 1984: 385-6.

<sup>2</sup>I told such a story in my 1981: 263-5

(9) Ponce de Leon searched for the fountain of youth

might be either transparent or opaque. Since there is no fountain of youth, it has to be opaque to be true. If opaque, it ascribes to Ponce de Leon a functional relation to a mental token with the meaning of purportedly referring by the mode of 'the fountain of youth'. And the functional relation in this case must be such that the token causes "searching behavior" in Ponce de Leon. So we have answered Tomberlin's Challenge Two of showing how (9) could be true without "Ponce de Leon standing in a de re relation to some nonactual individual" (p. 12).

In the light of Tomberlin's criticisms of Chisholm and Kaplan, we can anticipate an objection from him along the following lines.

"On this account, (9) says that the searched for relation holds between Ponce de Leon and a mental token. Yet if we replace 'the fountain of youth' in (9) with a referring term, say 'Jane', then surely the resulting sentence says that the searched for relation holds between Ponce de Leon and the individual Jane. It is implausible that the singular term in that position should change its role according as it does or does not refer."

In effect, the objection resists the combination of the representational theory of the mind with the Quinean claim of similarity between (9) and attitude ascriptions. Because of the representational theory, the truth of a belief ascription depends on a relation to a certain type of mental token. Because of the similarity of a sentence like (9) to such an ascription, (9)'s truth also depends on a relation to a type of mental token. It is doubtless inappropriate to call the former relation "the believing relation" and the latter relation "the searching relation" but these relations are nonetheless the ones involved in the truth conditions of the respective sentences.

On this view, an opaque (B) does not affirm a relation between Ralph and Ortcutt, and even a transparent (B) does not primarily do so. However, the transparent (B) does so derivatively, for it affirms a relation between Ralph and a token, a relation that can hold only if the token refers to Ortcutt. Similarly, an opaque (9) does not affirm a relation between Ponce de Leon and the fountain of youth but the transparent (9) does so derivatively. And the singular term in the position of 'the fountain of youth' does not change its role according as it does or does not refer but according as the sentence is opaque or transparent.

Tomberlin's criticisms of Chisholm and Kaplan again enable us to anticipate an objection. "Even if sentences like (9) always affirm a relation between a person and a type of mental token, sentences of the form 'x loves y' surely do not: they always affirm a relation between two individuals. Now consider:

(14) Bob searched for Jane, his missing daughter he deeply loves.

`His missing daughter' undoubtedly refers to Jane. So (14) cannot be true unless its `Jane' refers to her too. Yet, on this account, `Jane' refers to mental tokens of a certain type."

The example is tricky. Why must `Jane' in (14) refer to the daughter for the sentence to be true? Presumably because there is some sort of anaphoric relation between `his missing daughter' and `Jane' - a simpler example would be the anaphoric dependence of `her' on `Jane' in `Bob searched for Jane because he loved her' - and it is assumed that this requires that the two terms corefer. But the assumption is far from obvious. Certainly such an assumption would not hold for many sorts of anaphora; for example, pronouns of laziness and Gareth Evans' "E-type" pronouns (1985: 76-175). Anaphora is a complicated matter.

I do not mean to imply that, with these brief remarks, all our troubles are over. Explaining modes of reference is hard in general and particularly hard where reference is "to nonexistents."<sup>3</sup> However, the remarks are the beginnings of an actualist answer to Tomberlin's challenge. The rational semantic strategy is to try to complete such an answer.

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<sup>3</sup>My best attempt at the latter is 1981: ch. 6