

Simplicity and the Metaphysics of Meaning*

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Abstract

This paper is about the metaphysics of meaning—about the nature of, and constraints on, truth when what is under consideration are statements about what expressions mean. Quinean scepticism about meaning is a scepticism about whether there are truths (or falsities) about what expressions mean. Crispin Wright suggests that by taking simplicity as “an alethic virtue” in the context of such scepticism we can secure truth for a theory of meaning (and hence secure determinacy of meaning from Quine’s attack). I examine and elaborate Wright’s response and consider the kind of conception of truth it might require. I argue that Wright’s proposal is flawed in such a way that we should doubt the plausibility of simplicity moves in similar contexts.

1 Indeterminacy of Translation and Meaning

1.1 Quine’s Thesis

For a translation manual to be correct the correlated expressions must have *the same meaning*. It seems that there are facts according to which translations are either correct or incorrect. But in Chapter 2 of *Word and Object* Quine argues that translation is indeterminate: there is *no such thing* as a correct translation manual.

Imagine a field linguist involved in *radical translation* (1960, p. 28): constructing a manual which translates expressions of a previously unencountered language—Jungle. Quine takes it that the only facts relevant to this project are facts about *stimulus meanings* (pp. 32–33). For a given speaker, the affirmative stimulus meaning of a sentence S is the class of all (sensory) stimulations that would prompt the speakers’ assent to S. The negative stimulus meaning is the class of all stimulations which would prompt dissent from S. The stimulus meaning of S is the ordered pair consisting of the affirmative and negative stimulus meaning. So the facts relevant to determining correct translation are the facts about speakers’ verbal behaviour relative to certain sensory stimulations (and associated dispositions).

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It is assumed that the linguist can identify the native speakers' signs for assent and dissent. Furthermore, we are 'allowed to suppose that we are able to interact with the native speakers in particular contexts, to put utterances to them in their own language [to prompt] assent or dissent, and in general to encourage the production of evidential data for our translation...' (Wright (1997), p. 398).

1.2 The 'Argument from Below'

Quine has different arguments for his thesis, I discuss the 'argument from below' (Quine (1970), for discussion of Quine's arguments see Segal (2000); Kirk (1986); Hookway (1988)).

Quine has us imagine that the field linguist hears the Jungle expression 'Gavagai' and on the basis of the behavioural evidence hypothesises that it is to be translated as 'there's a rabbit'. But other hypotheses are available (with respect to the predicate 'gavagai'): 'undetached rabbit part', 'rabbit temporal stage', 'rabbithood', and others (for discussion see Williams (2008a)). The sensory stimulations and (dispositions to) verbal behaviour are the same with respect to each alternative. The alternatives are, however, intuitively different in meaning and extension—as Soames (1999) argues Quine views them as, given certain background assumptions, *logically inconsistent*. But these alternatives are *observationally* equivalent: they fit the data just as well as does the translation of 'gavagai' as 'rabbit': one is presented with a rabbit when and only when one is presented with one of the alternatives. The relevant facts, therefore, underdetermine the linguists' choice of translation manual.

But how does Quine get from this underdetermination to indeterminacy? We are to imagine that the linguist has access to all *possible* observational data. Even in such idealised circumstances the observational data will not determine one hypothesis as uniquely correct. As Wright says 'there are *certain specific* translational hypotheses such that, however much data the [linguist] gathers, each will remain in play if any does' (1997, p. 402). If unlimited access to the empirically accessible facts doesn't determine which hypothesis the linguist should choose, then it isn't a factual matter which is correct.

The indeterminacy thesis is radical: Quine concludes that it is *meaning* and *reference* that are indeterminate (1969, p. 35). Moreover, indeterminacy of translation/meaning/reference applies equally to the domestic case (1992, p. 48).

There is a lot to question here. There are problems with Quine's restriction of the relevant facts (Antony (2000)). Quine's behaviourist commitment's are questionable (Chomsky (1968), and (Segal, 2000, especially pp. 135–136)). Also, there are difficulties for Quine's apparatus of stimulus meaning and dispositions to assent (Ziff (1970)). One might also question engaging in philosophy of language in the framework of "Radical Translation/Interpretation" as Quine and Davidson (1984) do (Heal, 1997, especially section 5). But I leave such worries and others aside now so as to focus on a specific strategy taken by Wright (1997). First, I examine a dispute between Evans and Hookway which sets the scene.

1.3 Evans' Reply

Evans thinks that the project of constructing an interpretative *theory of meaning* is different to the project of constructing a translation manual such that the indeterminacy of meaning doesn't follow from the indeterminacy of translation: 'translation is one thing, a theory of meaning another' (Evans 1975, p. 25, in his 1985). Suppose that our field linguist is trying to construct an interpretive theory of meaning for Jungle (of a Tarski-Davidson kind, Davidson (1984)). The meaning-theorist, on the basis of the evidence acquired, might include the following axiom

(A) For any x : 'gavagai' applies to $x \leftrightarrow x$ is a rabbit.

The theorist observes that the natives assent to 'etihw' in the presence of white things, and dissents in the absence of white things. The theorist proposes

(B) For any x : 'etihw' applies to $x \leftrightarrow x$ is white.

The Quinean claim will be that there are competing axioms equally supported by the evidence, such as

(A*) For any x : 'gavagai' applies to $x \leftrightarrow x$ is an undetached rabbit part.

and others. The facts don't determine which axiom to include for 'gavagai'. However, as Miller notes (p. 96), Evans suggests that we can rule out the meaning-theory that contains (A*) by attending to facts about the stimulus meanings of sentences in which expressions like 'gavagai' and 'etihw' appear *in combination*: Suppose that the meaning-theorist collects the following data (Wright, 1997, p. 405)

Situations which prompt assent to 'gavagai' and 'etihw' do not always prompt assent to the conjoined construction, 'etihw gavagai'. The latter is assented to only when a white rabbit is salient. 'Etihw' and 'gavagai' will, however, be assented to individually when a brown rabbit sits on the snow.

Taking (A) and (B) as our axioms (and supposing that 'Lo' means *there goes a...*), the truth-conditions—leaving aside required relativisations—of the native utterance 'Lo etihw gavagai' are

(TC) 'Lo etihw gavagai' is true \leftrightarrow there goes a white rabbit.

That (TC) correctly interprets the native utterance is confirmed by the evidence. But if Quine is correct, that very same evidence equally confirms

(TC*) 'Lo etihw gavagai' is true \leftrightarrow there goes a white undetached rabbit part.

However (TC*) is *not* supported by the evidence. If (TC*) were supported we would expect the natives to assent to an utterance of the quoted sentence when presented with a brown rabbit with a white undetached rabbit part, e.g. a white foot. But they *dissent* from the utterance in the presence of such a rabbit. So by considering the behaviour of the expressions in combination, along with the evidence about the native's verbal behaviour, we can rule out certain Quinean interpretations.

1.4 Hookway's Response

On behalf of Quine, Hookway (1988, p. 155) responds to Evans by offering, as the Quinean alternative, a disjunctive axiom to replace (B), something like (Miller, 2006, p. 98):

(B*) For any x : 'etihw' applies to $x \leftrightarrow$ either (a) 'etihw' occurs conjoined with 'gavagai' and x is part of a white animal or (b) 'etihw' occurs in a 'gavagai' free sentential context and x is white.

With (B*) in place it seems that once again we have indeterminacy of meaning. Although the evidence supports (TC), it equally supports

(TC**) 'Lo etihw gavagai' is true \leftrightarrow there goes an undetached rabbit part of a white animal.

As Miller notes this move allows Quine to hold onto (A*) (which takes 'gavagai' to mean *undetached rabbit part*) and also respect facts about stimulus meaning: natives assent to 'etihw' in the presence of white things (e.g. snow), but they dissent from 'Lo etihw gavagai' in the presence of a brown rabbit with a white foot (p. 98).

The point seems to be that with enough adjustments and a little imagination Quinean alternatives can be devised such that Evans' considerations don't secure determinacy after all. There is much that might be questioned here but I outline it so as to set the scene for a discussion of the role of simplicity in determining the truth of a theory of meaning.

2 Simplicity

Taking into account the Evans/Hookway dispute the conclusion of the the Quinean challenge is that there is no such thing as a correct interpretive meaning-theory. Against this Wright argues that we can invoke simplicity as an alethic virtue such that *the simpler theory thereby counts as true*. In this section I examine the suggestion, in the next section (sect. 3) I argue that it is problematic.

2.1 Wright on Simplicity

2.1.1 What Simplicity?

Let's see what Wright takes the simplicity/complexity to consist in. Wright suggests that given that the Quinean alternatives 'survive by the postulation of ambiguities of various kinds. . . ' they will be in a clear sense *more complex* than our favoured interpretations (Wright, 1997, p. 411). So Quine's challenge relies on alternative theories where terms such as 'etihw' are ambiguous—contextually sensitive. A competing theory that doesn't attribute such ambiguity is in a sense *simpler*. Indeed, a theory that incorporates a Hookway-style disjunctive axiom *looks* to be more complex: it has more parts, it is longer, it is less elegant.

One might wonder whether this is a rather insignificant kind of complexity at the level of the formulation of the theory. However, on the plausible assumption that our semantic theory *corresponds to the conceptual repertoire of speakers*

of the language in question (p. 412)—that the theory is of something psychologically real—the issue of its complexity is significant: complexity of theory implies complexity with how things are independently of the theory. As Wright notes: ‘it is simplicity not in *semantic* theory but in the associated *psychological* theory that is at stake here’ (p. 412). (Simplicity of this kind often goes by the name ‘parsimony’: simplicity with respect to entities, processes, or events postulated. Simplicity in this sense is ‘paucity of postulation’ Sober (2003)).

Quinean alternatives—understood *à la* Hookway—seem to be less parsimonious. But, we will see, Wright says other things inconsistent with the claim that there are differences in simplicity/complexity (see 2.1.3 below). Before coming to this, let’s look at Wright’s statement of the argument against Quine.

2.1.2 An Alethic Virtue?

Why should we take it that simplicity counts towards the *truth* of the theory—that it is an *alethic virtue*—rather than a *non-alethic* criterion of theory-choice?

As Wright himself notes

the point is well taken that simplicity cannot be assumed without, further ado, to be an alethic—truth-conducive—virtue in empirical theory generally. There is *prima facie* sense in the idea that of two empirically adequate theories, it might be the more complex that is actually faithful to the reality which each seeks to circumscribe.

Might it be the case that a more complex meaning-theory is faithful to reality? Wright thinks not

the thought that, when it comes to radical interpretation, there is an ulterior psychologico-semantic reality which an empirically adequate translation scheme might somehow misrepresent is, of course, exactly what Quine rejects—exactly what he famously stigmatizes as the myth of the semantic museum. And with that rejection in place, methodological virtues which are not, in realistically conceived theorizing, straightforwardly alethic can now become so. In such cases the methodologically best theory ought to be reckoned true just on that account (p. 411).

Wright concludes

It is therefore not enough for a defender of Quine to seek to save the alternative schemes by postulations which, though still principled and general, are comparatively expensive in terms of ambiguity and other forms of complication. If a simpler scheme is available, that fact is enough to determine that these alternatives are *untrue*, by the lights of the only notion of truth that, in Quine’s view, can engage the translational enterprise (p. 411).

One thing to note is that the question of why simplicity should be taken to be alethic has not been answered. A condition of the possibility of simplicity being alethic is offered: accept a certain conception of truth and simplicity can become alethic (more on this below).

2.1.3 An Internal Worry

Before considering the question of the relevant notion of truth, note that there is a serious tension in Wright's thinking. Wright concedes to Quine that an 'ulterior psychologico-semantic reality' has been rejected. So, on the one hand we have the contention that a range of theories make (distinct) claims about how things are psychologically with language users, and that the theory which maximises psychological simplicity is by that fact true, yet on the other hand we have a repudiation of the very reality in question! How can a theory be true because of something specific it says about the nature of a certain region of reality, and at the same time that region of reality not exist?

Wright needs to offer us a different story about what simplicity consists in. Whether there is a satisfying story to tell here, I leave aside, since in what follows I will simply *grant* Wright that we have simplicity of some significant kind.

Before arguing against Wright's position I want to get clearer about how it is possible for simplicity to become alethic. I elaborate Wright's position by defending it against a criticism levelled at it by Miller (2006).

2.2 Miller Contra Wright

Miller construes Wright as arguing

1. If theories deal with a non-robustly factual subject matter, then simplicity is an alethic virtue of those theories
2. Theories of meaning deal with a non-robustly factual subject matter

Therefore

3. Simplicity is an alethic virtue for theories of meaning.

Miller argues that in order for Wright to be entitled to (2) he would need to

have established that the facts about stimulus meaning are capable of justifying the selection of the favoured theory of meaning in preference to one of its Quinean competitors: only so could the claim that theories of meaning deal with a non-robustly *factual* subject matter be justified (Miller, 2006, pp. 99–100).

So Miller argues

- i. Theories of meaning deal with a non-robustly factual subject matter only if facts about stimulus meaning are capable of justifying the selection of the favoured theory
- ii. Facts about stimulus meaning aren't capable of justifying the selection of the favoured theory [from Quine's argument]

Therefore

- iii. Theories of meaning don't deal with a non-robustly factual subject matter.

If Miller’s argument is sound, Wright is not entitled to premise (2).

In the above passage Wright acknowledges that Quine would reject meaning discourse—discourse about meaning issuing statements about what terms mean—as having a robustly factual subject matter (more on ‘robustness’ below) by suggesting that theorizing about meaning is not a species of *realistically conceived theorizing*. However since Wright also takes simplicity to be something that can count towards the *truth* of a theory, he must take meaning-discourse to be *non-robustly* factual. But Miller’s point is that in response to Quine this is dialectically inappropriate: Quine’s rejection of meaning discourse being robustly factual is a rejection of both robustness *and factuality*.

2.3 A Reply on Behalf of Wright

I take it that Wright would reject Miller’s (i) (a move along the lines I am about to propose is suggested in a footnote by Miller, p. 112, n. 7). Instead Wright would endorse:

- (M) Theories of meaning deal with a non-robustly factual subject matter only if meaning discourse is *minimally truth-apt*.

It is not a necessary condition on the *factuality* of the subject matter of a theory of meaning that facts about stimulus meaning are capable of justifying one or another theory (this is, rather, a necessary condition on a discourse counting as *realistic*—it pertains to *robustness* not *factuality*). All that is required for factuality is the—weaker—minimal truth-aptness of the theory.

I take it that Wright’s picture is: truth-aptness secures *factuality* of subject matter; what it is for a discourse to have a factual subject matter just is for its statements to be susceptible of truth or falsity (genuine assertions). But admitting this much leaves it open what such truth or falsity *consists in*. For a discourse, or statement, within that discourse, to count as truth-apt is something quite *minimal*—it doesn’t determine the *nature* of the facts, and specifically, how “robust” they are. Hence, *robustness* of the facts is determined in addition to factuality. For a subject matter to be *robustly* factual is for the discourse it is the subject matter of to exhibit the marks of some kind of realism (see (Wright, 1992, pp. 89–90)). (To take one of Wright’s examples one might think that a mark of a discourse being ‘realistic’ is that it exhibits *cognitive command*, very roughly, ‘any disagreement within the discourse involves something worth describing as a *cognitive shortcoming*’ on behalf of one of the disputants (p. 93)).

Quine succeeds in disputing the *robustness* of the subject matter of meaning discourse by rejecting the myth of the semantic museum. However, Quine doesn’t have the resources to rule out the *factuality* of such discourse, on Wright’s weaker understanding of what that involves.

This fits into Wright’s re-conception of realism/anti-realism debates according to which the anti-realist (e.g. Quine) should accept minimal truth-aptness (and hence in a weak sense factuality), but the substance of the dispute with the realist comes at the level of robustness.

It was noted above that Wright hints at what the conditions of the possibility of simplicity being alethic are. The obstacle of meaning discourse being *robustly factual* (the myth of the semantic museum) needs to be removed as a condition

of simplicity being an alethic virtue for theories of meaning—we can turn to Quine for this. Furthermore, *some conception* of truth needs to be in play for meaning discourse, as a further condition of simplicity being alethic (e.g. minimal truth). Wright’s conception of truth (1992; 2003) gives us a clearer idea of how to understand these conditions.

A further point that should be noted is that another aspect of Wright’s package seems to be operative, namely, *pluralism* about truth, according to which ‘there may be a variety of notions, operative within distinct discourses, which pass the test [for being a truth-predicate]’ (Wright (1992), p. 25). It seems that the very idea of simplicity which is, supposedly, *not* alethic in realistically conceived discourses *becoming* alethic in an anti-realistically conceived discourse involves the idea that what counts as truth *varies* across discourses.

Wright’s move still runs the risk of question begging since it is not clear why Quine should accept factuality even in the minimalist sense. Perhaps the proper lesson of Quine’s argument is that meaning discourse is not even truth-apt: it doesn’t issue in genuine assertion. At this point Wright might argue *from* his minimal criteria for truth-aptness to the truth-aptness of meaning-discourse. Such a move would parallel the move Wright makes when he argues against those who view *ethical* discourse as not issuing in genuine assertion. Wright’s criteria for truth-aptness are *discipline* and *syntax* (pp. 28–29). A discourse is disciplined just in case there are ‘firmly acknowledged standards of proper and improper use of its ingredient sentences’ (p. 29). A discourse satisfies the syntax criterion just in case its statements exhibit ‘all the overt syntactic trappings of assertoric content (resources for—apparent—conditionalisation, negation, embedding within propositional attitudes, and so on)’ (p. 29).

Meaning-discourse does seem to satisfy Wright’s criteria for minimal truth-aptness. Take a statement of meaning discourse such as (R): “‘rabbit’ means *rabbit*”. Are such statements disciplined? Arguably yes, since there are acknowledged standards of appropriateness (e.g. we accept—and there seems to be some governing standard in our accepting—(R) but not (D): “‘rabbit’ means *dog*”). This is delicate since admitting that a discourse is disciplined had better not invoke *truth* as the governing standard. That the discourse is disciplined, then, must pertain to conditions of appropriateness or acceptability by some other standard. (That there are such standards doesn’t seem to be something that Quine would deny since he takes it that the field linguist would choose translation manuals on pragmatic grounds).

Does meaning discourse satisfy the syntactic criterion? Again, arguably yes. All of the following *seem* acceptable (syntactically)

1. It is not the case that ‘rabbit’ means *rabbit*.
2. If ‘rabbit’ means *rabbit*, then ‘rabbit’ does not mean *dog*.
3. S believes (etc) that ‘rabbit’ means *rabbit*

So, the statements of meaning discourse seem to exhibit the right sort of syntactic features and hence meet Wright’s second criterion.

Still, it is unclear whether Quine would accept a story along these lines. But as long as the standards of discipline are Quine-acceptable (say, pragmatic), and the satisfaction of the syntax criterion is that the discourse *seems* syntactically

acceptable, it doesn't seem obvious that Quine couldn't accept that meaning-discourse satisfies Wright's criteria. He might, however, still resist the move to meaning-discourse *thereby* being (minimally/weakly) factual, by denying that the criteria are criteria of truth-aptness/factuality. In any case let's *grant* Wright that (a) meaning-discourse is minimally truth-apt and hence weakly factual, and (b) that there is therefore some notion of truth at play, which, given Quine's considerations, will have to be anti-realistically conceived (e.g. superassertibility). These are the conditions of the possibility of simplicity becoming alethic. Having granted Wright this much, and that there is simplicity, I now argue that there is a problem for his approach.

3 Against Simplicity

We should be under no illusion that we are any clearer *that* simplicity partially determines truth, or *why* simplicity partially determines truth. Why not think that simplicity is just useful for us? Wright suggests that simplicity can become alethic the real question is whether it *does become* alethic. I want now to put pressure on the claim that it does.

Quine is a sceptic about meaning, a response to Quine needs to show what constitutes the truth of our favoured theory—given that Quine is equally sceptical about the domestic case I switch now to an English expression:

(R) 'There goes a white rabbit' is true \leftrightarrow there goes a white rabbit.

as opposed to empirically equivalent alternatives such as

(R*) 'There goes a white rabbit' is true \leftrightarrow there goes an undetached rabbit part of a white animal.

Wright's suggestion is that what constitutes the truth of a theory delivering (R) is (a) its fitting the empirical evidence, and (b) that it is more parsimonious. With respect to (b) Wright relies on his claim that simplicity of a theory of meaning is an alethic virtue. To claim this is to endorse a *principle*:

Sim Across worlds simplicity of a meaning-theory is, all else being equal, an alethic virtue of a meaning-theory.

Call this *the principle of simplicity*.

By appealing to the principle of simplicity we can help satisfy the following adequacy condition on a response to Quine:

1. Show how in the face of Quine's challenge there can be such a thing as a *true* meaning-theory.

However, we want a response to Quine that also satisfies a further adequacy condition:

2. Offer an anti-sceptical line of reply to Quine. This involves showing that the *true* theory is the one we *take to be true*.

If (2) is not satisfied then we would have to attribute error with respect to what we think we mean. This, I take it, is a kind of scepticism—although it is different to Quine’s since it is consistent with this scepticism that there is actually a truth about what we mean, it’s just that we are in error about what that is. I will assume that such scepticism is undesirable.

Wright’s move satisfies (2) since the theory we accept—the one which says that ‘there goes a white rabbit’ means *there goes a white rabbit*—is the simpler theory.

So, a response to Quine which endorses the principle of simplicity can seemingly satisfy the two adequacy conditions. But is such a position tenable? I want now to argue against Wright in two stages.

3.1 Stage 1

First I argue that the same response cannot satisfy *both* adequacy conditions if we invert the Quinean challenge.

Imagine that we are in some possible world W where *we take* our term ‘rabbit’ to mean *undetached rabbit part*, and *we take* the meaning of ‘white’ to be specified along the lines of a Hookway-style disjunctive axiom given above. So in world W our assessment is that (R^*) : “‘there goes a white rabbit’ is true if and only if *there goes an undetached rabbit part of a white animal*” is true. Quine’s counterpart at W will argue that there are competing theories, which are empirically equivalent (given access to *all* of the relevant facts) yet logically inconsistent. The rival schemes in W will be those such as the one that holds (R) —that takes ‘there goes a white rabbit’ to mean *there goes a white rabbit*. Quine’s counterpart will conclude that it is indeterminate what we *actually do mean* at W . This is to invert the Quinean challenge.

How, then, are we to go against such Quinean scepticism about meaning and secure our intuitive assessment in W ? How are we to show why, in W , we are entitled to take (R^*) as *true*? Here, Wright’s simplicity move simply won’t work—it won’t deliver the desired result—since by invoking it we have to say that in W it is (R) that is true (since it fits the data equally and has the virtue of relative simplicity).

This shows that we cannot satisfy our adequacy conditions (1) and (2) *in general* by invoking the principle of simplicity: in W (1) is satisfied since in the face of Quine’s counterpart’s challenge we can still see, by appeal to simplicity, how there can be such a thing as a *true* theory. However, (2) is not satisfied since in W *what we take to be the true theory* is, by the principle of simplicity, *false*. We have truth in W *at the expense of error*: but together our adequacy conditions demand truth *without* error.

3.2 Stage 2

The second stage of the argument is that we have here a problem which isn’t simply a problem at W , but a more general problem for the simplicity theorist.

What should the simplicity theorist say in response to the inverted Quinean challenge? There seem to be three options

- a. Reject the principle of simplicity.
- b. Modify the principle of simplicity so that it doesn’t apply *at W*.

c. Accept error in W —we are mistaken about what we mean in W .

Taking (a) is to give up the simplicity strategy: rejecting the *principle* of simplicity means we have made no advance on either Quine’s initial challenge, or the inverted Quinean challenge. So taking (a) constitutes a *reductio* of the simplicity theorist’s position. On the assumption that (a)–(c) are exhaustive, that leaves (b) and (c). But now I want to argue that these latter options are problematic for the simplicity theorist.

It seems that (b) is implausible. First, we would fail to satisfy adequacy condition (1) at possible world W . That is to say, at W we would have nothing to offer in regards to how a theory can still be true in the face of the (inverted) Quinean challenge. Unless there is a reason to reject (1) at W , this is unacceptable.

Second, if the simplicity principle is to be modified so that it doesn’t apply at W then whatever reason we have for such a modification had better not carry over to the actual world, since then the principle wouldn’t apply at the actual world. Hence, we wouldn’t have advanced on the initial Quinean challenge, since we would have robbed ourselves of the resources for satisfying adequacy condition (1) at the actual world—we wouldn’t have anything to offer in regards to how in the face of the Quinean challenge a theory can still be *true*.

So we should make the following demand on the simplicity theorist who accepts (b): *whatever reason is invoked for modification of the simplicity principle had better not stop it applying in the actual world—so it had better be a reason local to W .*

However, the actual world A , and W are stipulated to have *only one* difference, namely, *what we take* to be what we mean by ‘there goes a white rabbit’ differs in each world. As such there is *one* fundamental fact F local to W , namely: in W we take ourselves to mean *there goes an undetached rabbit part of a white animal* by the sentence ‘there goes a white rabbit’. But is fact F something which can be a reason for overriding the simplicity principle at W ? If so we would have to modify the simplicity principle so as to get:

Sim* Across worlds simplicity of a meaning-theory is, all else being equal, an alethic virtue of a meaning-theory. *Other than at a world where we take ourselves to mean there goes an undetached rabbit part of a white animal by the sentence ‘there goes a white rabbit’*

But this is completely *ad hoc*. I can think of no grounds for accepting that the presence of fact F should override a principle of simplicity. There may be grounds, if there are it is the simplicity theorist that needs to offer them.

The simplicity theorist might respond by claiming that there is a further difference implied: in W what we take ourselves to mean is comparatively *complex*. If this thought is to be massaged into a defence of (b) then the following modification of the principle of simplicity will have to be put forward:

Sim** Across worlds simplicity of a meaning-theory is, all else being equal, an alethic virtue of a meaning-theory. *Other than at a world where what we take ourselves to mean is comparatively complex*

This, again, seems *ad hoc*: what independent motivation do we have for accepting the modification to the principle of simplicity?

Given the above considerations, then, I conclude that taking (b) as a response to the inverted Quinean challenge is implausible without further consideration and motivation of the modified simplicity principles. This is a challenge to the simplicity theorist.

What about (c)? (c) is problematic. First, in endorsing (c) the simplicity theorist would fail to satisfy adequacy condition (2) at possible world *W*. That is to say, at *W* we would have to endorse a kind of scepticism with respect to what we take ourselves to mean. Unless there is a reason to reject (2) at *W*, this is unacceptable.

Second, if the simplicity theorist is to attribute error to us about what we think we mean at *W* then whatever reason is invoked for attributing error at *W* had better not carry over to the actual world, since if it does, we would have to attribute error at *A*. But if we are to attribute error about what we think we mean at *A* then this is no advance on the *initial* Quinean challenge, since we would have robbed ourselves of the resources for satisfying (2) from our adequacy conditions—we wouldn't have an *anti-sceptical* line of reply, we would be *endorsing* a kind of scepticism.

So we should make the following demand on the simplicity theorist who accepts (c): *whatever reason is invoked for attributing error at W had better be local to W*.

But what fact is local to *W* such that we have a reason for attributing error at *W* that isn't a reason for attributing error at *A*? As noted above there is *one* fundamental fact *F* local to *W*, namely: in *W* we take ourselves to mean *there goes an undetached rabbit part of a white animal* by the sentence 'there goes a white rabbit'. The further difference implied by *F* is that in *W* what we take ourselves to mean is comparatively *complex*.

I take it that *F* itself offers no reason for attributing error at *W*. The simplicity theorist therefore has to claim that *in virtue of the fact that, at W, we take ourselves to mean something which is relatively complex* we have a reason to attribute error at *W* with respect to what we think we mean.

I think, however, that we should be suspicious of this move. One might think that if there is error at *W*—as the simplicity theorist is now claiming—there had better be some kind of explanation of that error. That is to say, without an explanation of how the language users of *W* *came to be* in error we should be highly suspicious of an attribution of error to them. The fact that what they take themselves to mean is relatively complex is not itself the kind of explanation of error we are looking for—it is no explanation of how they *came to be* in error. So what fact about *W*, explains how the language users of *W* came to be in error? The onus is on the simplicity theorist to tell us.

I conclude, therefore, that option (c) is also problematic for the simplicity theorist.

4 Conclusion

The argument against the simplicity theorist that I have made goes in two stages. First, I have presented an inverted Quinean challenge. By parity of reasoning the simplicity theorist is compelled to make the simplicity move with respect to the inverted Quinean challenge. But I have argued that the move with respect to the inverted challenge is problematic. I have tried to force, in

the second stage of the argument, the simplicity theorist onto option (a)—by arguing that options (b) and (c) are problematic. But to take option (a) is to say that it is not the case that *across worlds, hence even in the actual world* simplicity is an alethic virtue of meaning-theory.

One might be suspicious of my argument's appeal to 'what we take ourselves to mean' differing across worlds. Quine might deny the possibility of such a difference. But here are two brief thoughts in response: (1) there may be a Quine-acceptable construal, in terms of stimulus meaning, that does the trick of forcing a sceptical result on the simplicity theorist in some worlds. (2) all I require is that *Wright* accept the differences of meaning-intuitions in different worlds. Since Wright accepts differences in *simplicity* it is difficult to see how he could reject differences in meaning-intuitions, since if one is in a position to deem a theory simpler, and thereby true, one is also in a position, it seems, to take it to be true.

I have argued that taking simplicity to be an alethic virtue of a meaning-theory in the context of Quine's meaning scepticism is problematic. It seems that closely related contexts, that of Kripkean (Kripke (1982)), and (similar) inscrutability-based worries would have sufficed (for the latter see (Putnam, 1981, Chapter 2), for discussion see Hale and Wright (1997b) and Williams (2007, 2008b)). Hence the simplicity move considered here has wider application (for an interesting similar move see Lewis's application of *eligibility* to interpretation in Lewis (1983), for discussion see Williams (2007)). I take it, also, that the criticism I have advanced here has wider application.

This should force reconsideration of Quine's argument on the assumption that accepting indeterminacy is untenable—argued for by e.g. Williams (2008c); Wright (1997), pp. 400–401; Heal (1997), pp. 192–193; and Soames (1999).

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