Chapter 6: Problems with the B-Theory Semantics

The B-theory faces a dilemma: the B-theory semantics developed in Chapter 5 gives incorrect truth conditions for indexical statements, and the most promising alternative semantics gives incorrect truth conditions for certain statements about linguistic utterances.

6.1 Problems with the Indexical Nature of Temporal Discourse

Objection to the B-Theory Semantics  Sentences with apparently distinct meanings receive identical truth conditions under the B-theory semantics. For example, (1) and (2) are both true iff my fifth anniversary is March 12.

(1) My fifth anniversary is March 12.
(2) My fifth anniversary is today. (uttered on March 12)

But (1) and (2) seem not to express “the same semantical knowledge” (p. 88). Likewise, when I say ‘I’m glad that’s over with’ at 5:00 after a dreaded visit to the dentist’s office, I seem to be saying more than simply that I’m glad the visit culminated prior to 5:00—I’m also glad the visit is in my past.

Response: Token-Reflexivity  Following Reichenbach (1947), Kneale (1949), and Smart (1963, 1966), B-theorists respond by incorporating into the truth conditions for a given token explicit reference to the token itself:

An utterance u of “My fifth anniversary is today” is true iff my fifth anniversary is the same day as u
An utterance u of “Bill swam” is true iff Bill swims earlier than u
An utterance u of “Bill will swim” is true iff Bill swims later than u

etc.

Yourgrau (1987, note 21) objects:

The Kaplan-Perry rule for ‘now’, if put precisely, would be: "For all times t and speakers s, if s employs ‘now’ correctly at t, he refers to t." Now a rule is no good unless you can use it, but, if you try to employ this rule, it becomes obvious that, in grasping it, you get a handle not on any particular time, but only on a universal conditional on times (and speakers). The problem is that to use the rule to get to a time you must instantiate the universal quantifier, but, to accomplish this instantiation, you must already have a particular time t in mind. But how do you get to have it in mind? By describing it (e.g., as Saturday, 10:00 A.M.)? (This is vigorously denied by Kaplan and Perry.) By taking t to be the present moment-i.e., now? (This is circular; it is the rule itself that was supposed to show how we use ‘now’ to get to a particular time.) It seems, rather, that Kaplan and Perry have mistaken a necessary constraint on a mode of designation for a particular use of ‘now’ (that if ‘now’ is used at t, the mode of designation should determine t) for the mode of designation itself.

We could formulate the axioms instead as follows:
Val(True, “My fifth anniversary is today”) iff my fifth anniversary is the same day as this very utterance
Val(True, “Bill swam.”) iff Bill swims earlier than this very utterance

But if the metalanguage demonstrative “this utterance” is truly a genuine demonstrative, then it should technically refer to the statement of the axiom itself! And if it’s not a genuine demonstrative, “then it is not clear how the token-reflexive theorem can be generated” (p. 90).

6.2 “There Are No Utterances”

Suppose we accept the token-reflexive approach to a B-theory semantics. Then the semantics will never allow utterances like “There are no utterances” to be true:

An utterance u at time t of “There are no utterances” is true iff there are no utterances at time t, the time of this very utterance

Since the truth conditions described by this T-theorem can never obtain, then this statement is evaluated by the semantics as being necessarily false. But it is certainly possible that there were never any utterances. Thus the B-theorist’s attempt to account for indexicality via token-reflexivity results in inadequacies elsewhere.

6.3 The B-Theorist’s Dilemma

The B-theorist’s options: (1) allow token-reflexivity and come up with a story about sentences like “There are no utterances” (Higginbotham 1995); (2) disallow token-reflexivity and come up with another story about indexicality. Higginbotham (1995) fails to accomplish (1), and even if he succeeded, the other problems with token-reflexivity are serious. Mellor (1981) attempts (2), but also faces serious problems.

6.4 On Mellor’s Way Out

Mellor: we don’t need indexicality in our semantics in the first place—tense may be indispensable (e.g., for explaining human action), but we can keep it out of metaphysics and semantics and within the realm of belief (psychology). “On his view, a commitment to tensed beliefs entails nothing about there being tensed truth conditions for my tensed utterances, and certainly nothing about reality’s being tensed” (p. 95).

Objections: (1) beliefs must also have a semantics; (2) the goal of a semantical theory is to characterize a speaker’s knowledge, and if psychological phenomena like knowledge and belief are tensed, then we can’t expel tense from semantics; (3) even if we can keep tense out of semantics and in psychology, how can we have a psychological theory that explains tense when our metaphysics contains no such thing?