

Troubles with Plantinga's Reading of Millikan

RUTH GARRETT MILLIKAN

University of Connecticut

The last section of Alvin Plantinga's paper "Content and Natural Selection" (this Journal, LXXXIII No.2, 435–58, September 2011) argues that on my account of teleosemantics, there could be no such thing as a belief with the content that God does not exist, hence no belief in a fully naturalized theory of mind, hence, for example, no belief in teleosemantics. There are a number of ways in which Plantinga's interpretation departs very far from my actual position on language, thought and, more specifically, on teleosemantics. I cannot present my positive views on these matters again here, but I would like to say what some of my views are not.

First, teleosemantics is a theory about extensional or referential terms and about the representational aspect of mental attitudes only. Many adjectives, nouns and verbs are not extensional but survive in the language for other reasons. Similarly, it is not the function of every indicative sentence to express or produce a descriptive belief. Sentences containing evaluative terms, semantic terms and modal terms, also sentences in mathematics and logic are fairly obvious cases. Sentences asserting existence or nonexistence and sentences asserting identity are other examples. According to my *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories* (1984), the function of "God does not exist," for instance, would not be to express a belief, a representation that maps onto the world, but to shelve a concept. "Teleosemantics," on my interpretation, has nothing to say about cases of this sort. The theory of empirical concepts, introduced in LTOBC and further developed, for example, in *On Clear and Confused Ideas* (2000) and (Millikan 2010), does, however, have a lot to say about such cases.

A central theme of all of these essays is the rejection of "meaning rationalism," the view that we know *a priori* what we mean—indeed,

that we mean anything at all—by our extensional words and concepts. If Plantinga’s worries were right that on the teleosemanticist’s view the word “God” could have no extensional meaning, there being nothing for it to correspond to, this would support his *reductio* only if meaning rationalism were true. But the possibility of confused and empty concepts that are not known to be so *a priori* (empty concepts being importantly other than mere empty descriptions) has been a central theme in my work.

On the other hand, if Plantinga takes the notion of God to be defined by one of the classical descriptions of God, then his argument should generalize to a claim that the teleosemanticist cannot explain how there could be any empty names or descriptions at all. But, of course, the teleosemanticist, like other empiricists, takes beliefs and other mental attitudes to be compositional. There is nothing more puzzling about empty descriptions than there is about false beliefs, an explanation of the possibility of false beliefs being the very *raison d’être* of teleosemantics.

To be sure, Plantinga’s simple description of my teleosemantics makes it hard to see how beliefs could be compositional. First, he implies that according to me, representations are always designed to be immediately used in the guidance of action. My position is, rather, that only “pushmi-pullyu representations” connect directly with action (1996, 2004 Ch.6, Ch.13ff). The function of beliefs is participation in theoretical and practical inference. If every belief had to be coupled with an appropriate action, how compositionality could work would indeed be a mystery. Second, having found a passage in which I say of teleosemantic theories generally (all kinds) that they “ride piggyback” on various different theories of what a true representation is, Plantinga proceeds to ignore my own theory of true representation, explicitly replacing it with Dretske’s theory of indication in discussing the implications of my work. A discussion of the emergence of compositionality, given my own theory, can be found in my (2004, Ch. 14).

One last small point about Plantinga’s reading of Millikan. I describe the content of “indicative” or “descriptive” representations as conditions that figure in a normal explanation of how their consumers have historically succeeded in fulfilling their functions in responding to the representations. Plantinga follows me in noting that many different conditions must figure in any such normal explanation. He does not follow me, however, when I explain that the content-determining conditions are those defined by a function, in the mathematical sense, of the form of the representation, such that certain changes in the representation would systematically have required certain changes in these conditions, and that the producers of the representations must have as

a designed function to effect that the correspondence defined by this function exists.

References

- Millikan, R.G. 1984. *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press).
- 1996. “Pushmi-pullyu Representations.” In James Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives vol. IX*, Atascadero CA: Ridgeview Publishing 1996, pp. 185–200. Reprinted in R.G. Millikan, *Language: A Biological Model* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2005.
- 2000. *On Clear and Confused Ideas* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press).
- 2004. *Varieties of Meaning; The Jean Nicod Lectures 2002* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press).
- 2010. “On Knowing the Meaning; With a coda on Swampman,” *Mind* 119, no. 473, pp. 43–81.