Unanswerable questions for Millians

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Abstract I argue that Millianism has the very odd consequence that there are simple direct questions that Millians can grasp, but they cannot answer them in the positive or the negative, or in some other way, nor could they say that they do not know the answer.

Millianism is the view that some simple terms like proper names contribute only their referents to the semantic content of a sentence in which they occur, implying that two such terms that are co-referential are interchangeable in all sentential contexts. There are well known consequences of this doctrine, especially in some epistemic contexts, that appear to be counter-intuitive. A Babylonian who has not yet discovered that the first heavenly body that appears after dusk (which he calls 'Hesperus') is the very same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn (which he calls 'Phosphorus') may assent to the sentence 'Hesperus appears in the night sky', but dissent from the sentence 'Phosphorus appears in the night sky', despite the fact that those sentences would be expressing the very same proposition on the Millian view (assuming our Babylonian speaks English). If he believes one, he must believe the other. Despite the fact he is considered to be one of the pioneers of modern Millianism, Kripke (1972) never wished to endorse this apparently odd

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consequence. But some of his followers bit the bullet. Their burden was to explain away these apparent counter-intuitive implications. Salmon (1986, 1995) did this in convincing fashion by utilizing the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. There are different ways of 'taking a proposition', on Salmon's view, and the Babylonian takes the very same proposition in one way when he assents to the first sentence, and takes it in another way when he dissents from the second one. The Babylonian both believes and disbelieves the very same proposition, though no charge of irrationality follows. Let us grant all this to Salmon. But there are other odd consequences to follow.

Suppose our Babylonian, call him 'Samsuiluna', despite his ignorance about certain astronomical facts during his time concerning the planet Venus, was way advanced in philosophy of language. Let us assume that he formulated Millianism in rigorous detail and became a strong advocate of it. Further suppose that Samsuiluna was an open-minded person who was always willing to accept his fallibilism concerning his beliefs about the external world, which of course apply in particular to his beliefs concerning Venus. Now if were to ask him 'Do you believe that Hesperus appears in the night sky?', he would say 'yes, confidently. But what if we asked:

Do you believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky?
How should he respond then?

Clearly Samsuiluna cannot answer in the positive. (In fact given that Hesperus is Phosphorus, that is the correct answer under the Millian view.) So can he answer in the negative? Now suppose Samsuiluna has never before considered the possibility that the first heavenly body that appears after dusk may in fact turn out to be the very same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn. We ask him to entertain this possibility before he responds to our question.[1] Once he does so, he comes to realize that his epistemic situation with respect to the proposition that the first heavenly body that appears after dusk is the very same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn, is completely neutral. He has no evidence for or against it, and both it and its negation are fully compatible with all his beliefs. He would therefore not be justified in asserting this proposition, or its negation. He then reasons that if those two objects are in fact one and the same, then given his Millianism, he in fact does believe, now, the proposition expressed by the sentence 'Phosphorus appears in the night sky' which would be expressing the very same proposition expressed by 'Hesperus appears in the night sky' which he already believes. He notices that his epistemic situation with regard to the proposition that would be expressed by the sentence 'I don't believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky', if he were to utter it, would be on a par, in terms of his epistemic justification for it, with the proposition expressed by the sentence 'the first heavenly body that appears after dusk is the very same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn'. Given that he would be unjustified in asserting the latter, he

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[1] I use the term 'question' to talk about the semantic content of an interrogative sentence. In this usage an interrogative sentence poses a question, similar to a declarative sentence expressing a proposition. I note this explicitly here for the distinction between an interrogative sentence and the question posed by that sentence will be crucial for the arguments to follow.

comes to realize that the same would be true of the former. (In fact given that Hesperus is Phosphorus, under the Millian view, he would be saying something false, if he were to answer the question negatively.)

Having realized that a simple 'yes' or 'no' will not do, he then considers whether he can say that he does not know the answer to the question. If he says, 'I don't know' that would be elliptical for, 'I don't know whether I believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky'. Suppose Samsuiluna has adopted a theory of belief very much in line with his modern successor Salmon. Under his theory, if p is a singular proposition, then 'S believes that p' would be analyzed as: 'There is a way x that S takes p, and BEL (S, p, x)' (where BEL is a triadic relation between a person, a proposition and a way of taking that proposition). So if Samsuiluna says that he does not know the answer to our question, given his theory of belief, that would entail the truth of the following: it is not the case that Samsuiluna knows whether there is a way x that he takes the proposition that p (Phosphorus appears in the night sky) such that BEL (Samsuiluna, p, x). But then he realizes that if unbeknownst to him the first heavenly body that appears after dusk is the very same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn, then, such an answer would be false. Under this scenario, which he cannot rule out, it would follow that there is a way he takes the proposition that Phosphorus appears in the night sky and believes it, and also knows that he believes it, given that there is a way in which he takes the proposition that Hesperus appears in the night sky (which is the very same proposition under the Millian view) and believes it, and knows that he believes it. Simply put, he already knows that he believes that Hesperus appears in the night sky, and under this scenario, that would entail that he also knows that he believes that Phosphorus appears in the night sky. Having gone through this piece of reasoning, he realizes that he would not be justified in asserting that he does not know the answer to our question. (In fact given that Hesperus is Phosphorus, under the Millian view, he would be saying something false, if he were to claim that he does not know the answer.)

Samsuiluna then considers a reply at a meta-linguistic level: 'I do not know whether the sentence "I believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky" is true or false.' Now this would express something true of him, but that is not what the question is asking. After all, he knows quite well that we are not interested in whether he knows that a certain sentence expresses a truth. We simply wish to know whether he believes a certain proposition. He thinks of those times when we may give a meta-linguistic reply as such, but realizes that those are cases when we do not grasp the question that is being asked. Clearly this option is unavailable for him. He knows very well that he grasps the question. To grasp a declarative sentence is to grasp the proposition expressed by it, and to grasp an interrogative sentence is to grasp the question posed by that sentence. There is no part of our interrogative sentence we used to pose our question that Samsuiluna does not grasp. So he comes to realize that though at the sentential level it is true of him that he does not know any sentence that correctly answers the interrogative sentence 'Do you believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky?', that does not entail that he does not know the answer to the question posed by that sentence. (In fact given that Hesperus is Phosphorus, under the Millian view, he does know the answer to the question.)

So it appears to him that the best that he could perhaps do is to give a conjunctive-conditional answer: 'If the first heavenly body that appears after dusk is not the same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn, then I do not believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky, and if the first heavenly body that appears after dusk is the same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn, then I believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky.' But then he realizes that the first conjunct may turn out to be false. What if the last heavenly body he sees before dawn also appears in the night sky, but is not the same as the first heavenly body that appears after dusk? If so, Samsuiluna may have seen Phosphorus in the night sky, not knowing that it was the same object as the last heavenly body he sees before dawn, and as a result he may have acquired the belief that Phosphorus appears in the night sky. So then Samsuiluna considers adding more to his reply: 'If the first heavenly body that appears after dusk is not the same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn, then I do not believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky, unless I have seen it under some other guise and came to believe that it appears in the night sky, and if the first heavenly body that appears after dusk is the same object as the last heavenly body that appears before dawn, then I believe that Phosphorus appears in the night sky.'

Evidently a simple yes/no question seems to require Samsuiluna to give such an annoyingly long-winded answer. By adopting Millianism he has put a lot of strain on his use of language. But that is not the only problem. It is very implausible to hold that such a conjunctive-conditional answer could be considered as a proper way of answering our question. Claiming that it does, would be violating the following general principle that appears to be a truism: if S is asked a direct question in the form [Is it the case that p?] (where p is a proposition) and S grasps the question and responds, then S could be considered to have correctly answered the question only if his answer entails that p is true or that *not-p* is true. If we were allowed to violate this principle, we could then answer any question that we grasp. Are there other intelligent beings in the universe? There are other intelligent beings in the universe, if there are other intelligent beings in the universe, and there are no other intelligent beings in the universe, if there are no other intelligent beings in the universe. Surely the response is true, but we have not answered the question. We could also make our response to a question less trivial looking, and more informative, analogous to the one Samsuiluna considers. Is it the case that Pluto was discovered in the twentieth century? If the Encyclopedia Britannica says so, then it is so, and if it says that it is not so, then it is not so. Such an answer does not answer the question, even if true, and even if the respondent knows that it is true, simply because it does not entail anything about the truth value of the proposition that Pluto was discovered in the twentieth century. Now Samsuiluna's conjunctive-conditional response that he considers is not any different. Does his answer entail anything about the truth value of the proposition that he believes that Phosphorus appears in the evening? Clearly not. So Samsuiluna would not have answered the question by that answer.

Having gone through all of this Samsuiluna realizes that he simply cannot answer the question. Our question then has a very unusual epistemic status for Samsuiluna; his Millianism forces him to remain silent, despite the fact that he grasps what is being asked.

The kinds of questions that Millians like Samsuiluna cannot answer are not limited to such questions about what they believe. Clearly there are a host of other propositional attitude contexts that would be subject to the same problem. But that is not all. In fact Samsuiluna is in no better position to answer the simpler question expressed by 'Does Phosphorus appear in the night sky?' Obviously he cannot say 'yes'; but again, upon some reflection, he would come to realize that he can neither say 'no', nor that he does not know, given that unbeknownst to him it may turn out that he knows that Phosphorus appears in the night sky (which in fact he does, under the Millian view). Millians then would have to accept the very odd consequence of their view that there are simple direct questions that they can grasp, but cannot answer in the positive or the negative, or in some other way, nor could they say that they do not know the answer.

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