

THE BALLAD OF CLYDE THE MOOSE

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SUPPOSE we are hunter-gatherers who happen to speak modern English and engage in sophisticated collective theorizing and inductive analysis. One of us, Mary, thinks she hears something make a noise in a cottonwood grove. It goes 'snuff, snuff.' This is exciting and we immediately debrief Mary.

We ask her what she thinks it was. A big animal, she thinks. Possibly a moose. As is our wont, we agree to give it a name. We call it Clyde.

But what if Clyde wasn't a moose, we ask. She agrees it may not have been.

And what if it wasn't a big animal? Again she agrees it may not have been. It may, sadly, have been a loud muskrat.

What if it didn't go 'snuff, snuff' in the woods? Here she boggles. Clyde *must* have gone 'snuff, snuff' in the woods. If Clyde was there at all, of *course* Clyde went 'snuff, snuff' in the woods, since Clyde simply *is* whatever went 'snuff, snuff' in the woods, if anything did. It is this 'must' I want to explore.

Let's proceed by elaborating our story:

As is also our wont, we discuss Mary's hypothetical moose long into the night. Many of us have relevant evidence to offer. One person saw some broken twigs north of the woods suggesting that a big animal had passed that way. Another person saw moose tracks well to the east, but apparently headed toward the woods. And so on, for hours, as we try to recreate the movements of the big animal we hope and believe is lurking in the neighborhood.

By morning what we have is a well developed theory in which a moose, Clyde, is posited to explain a by then huge assortment of observations—including, but only as one observation among others, Mary's apparent hearing of something going 'snuff,snuff' in the woods.

Come morning, we go out to look for Clyde, and sure enough, down by the creek, we find him. Since we are rather more inclined to ratiocination and rather softer of heart than run of the mill hunter-gatherers, we forego eating

Clyde and instead follow him around to study his habits and as far as possible reconstruct his movements of the day before.

In the end we succeed, and are able to tell which tracks, broken twigs, foul smells, and the like were caused by Clyde and which were not. It turns out that we did our theory building well. Most of the phenomena we attributed (probabilistically) to Clyde's actions were caused by him. But some were not. For instance he did not crush the tuft of grass west of the creek, as one of us proposed, and he did not go 'snuff, snuff' in the woods, having never been in the woods. That is alright, of course. One does not expect an existential theory of this sort to get everything right—it just has to get *enough* right.

Now Mary insisted many hours earlier that if Clyde existed at all, Clyde *must* have gone 'snuff, snuff' in the woods. She was wrong if 'it must be that p,' in this sense of 'must,' implies that p. But there was *some* insight she was expressing, and her 'must' locution seemed the natural way to express it. We can conclude that the variety of necessity Mary intended is not truth-entailing.

II

Let us step back and look at the epistemic evolution, and the parallel semantic evolution, of the hunters in our story. I meant the story to be an account of a certain kind of intellectual tradition, all truncated into one night's deliberation and debate, by a very small (though suitably self-contained) community. The kind of intellectual tradition I have in mind is represented in pure form by atomism, whereby the gross properties of matter are explained in part by the properties of hypothesized atoms, or by Cartesian mentalism, whereby the observable properties of persons are explained in part by the properties of hypothesized minds. Those traditions evolved over centuries, and the posited causal properties of their posited entities changed only from time to time over these centuries. The posited properties of posited Clyde were changed from hour to hour and minute to minute. Nevertheless, I mean the epistemic evolution of the Clyde-theory to resemble closely the epistemic evolution of atomic theory and Cartesian mentalism. If the reader thinks the resemblance is insufficiently close, I hope she will try to alter the story so as to make the resemblance closer. It should be possible to do so. Then we can learn a small but useful lesson about very grand subjects by considering the story of Clyde.

III

The lesson I refer to is epistemological. To see what it is, let us begin by seeing what it is not. It is often said that there are senses of 'must' and 'can' current in English which are best called 'epistemic' senses. Illustrative examples might be a case where you see a side road somewhere in the country when we are trying to find a friend's house, and say "That could be the road to

Jerry's," or a case where you say "That must be Nuel" in response to a knock on the door. It is reasonable to think that this 'must' is the same as 'not-could-not' in this sense of 'could', so they are related in a familiar way. And this sense of 'must' clearly is not truth-entailing. But it isn't the sense we want.

If asked whether you can conceive of it not being Nuel, you will say that you can. But if Mary is asked whether she can conceive of Clyde existing but not having gone 'snuff, snuff' in the woods she will say that she cannot; at least this is true around the time the Clyde-hypothesis is first introduced. Indeed, Mary's test for whether Clyde might not have gone 'snuff, snuff' presumably is a conceivability test. She tries to think away certain of Clyde's features - being huge, say - and she finds that she can do so. But when she tries to think away this one feature, having gone 'snuff, snuff' in the woods, she finds that to do so is to think Clyde away entirely. Clyde vanishes as an object of her thought unless she thinks of him as having gone 'snuff, snuff' in the woods. It is this peculiarly essential dependency that Mary expresses by saying that if Clyde exists at all, he *must* have gone 'snuff, snuff' in the woods.

A rough-and-ready diagnosis of the situation is that Mary has in her thought an object, Clyde, rather in the way a story has a character in it. To the extent that thought is like, or just is, inner speech, this makes sense. Around the time the Clyde hypothesis is introduced, the characterization of this object is sparse. In particular, "having gone 'snuff, snuff' in the woods" is so central and important a part of this characterization that to eliminate it is to eliminate the object characterized. "Having gone 'snuff, snuff' in the woods" is a necessary condition for objectivity - thinking Clyde as having it is a necessary condition for Clyde remaining an object of thought.

But this can change, and does. By morning Mary's contribution to the much embellished Clyde hypothesis is only one among many. That her's was the first entry is irrelevant; the business of hypothesis-construction is not the same business as, say, the setting forth of stipulative definitions for terms in a jointly authored algebra textbook. So long as Mary remains a willing player in the game of hypothesis elaboration, with all players aiming to frame the best hypothesis in light of the total evidence to be explained, she can claim for her piece of the hypothesis no pride of place. Quine has already argued that, or pretty much that.

IV

Nevertheless, Mary might not have been looking at things diachronically when the Clyde hypothesis first emerged. She might have been overly impressed by her inability to "think away" a certain component of that hypothesis. She might have decided that it was *absolutely certain* that Clyde, if real, went 'snuff, snuff' in the woods. A decent explication of "absolute certainty" is this:

it is absolutely certain that x is F iff it is very reasonable to suppose that x is F , and no forthcoming evidence could make it less than very reasonable.

Mary might have construed the sense of 'must be' at issue as a very strong epistemic modality, having the force of 'absolutely certain that.'

Of course it was not absolutely certain that Clyde, if real, went 'snuff, snuff' in the woods. But Mary's little thought experiment—trying to think away this property of Clyde and failing - was full of the danger of being so interpreted. Mary's thought-experiment was typical of a certain variety of philosopher's thought-experiment, always seductive and always misleading. What happens is that some object of thought is contemplated, and in the context in which this is done the characterization in thought of this object is sufficiently limited that some feature is necessary for retaining the object as an object. This is naturally expressed modally—the object "must be" or "has to be" such-and-such. The thought-experimenter then misconstrues this result as the proposition that it is absolutely certain that the object is such-and-such. We all know that conceivability arguments are treacherous when their conclusions involve logical modalities, although some conceivability arguments may be good, and even uneliminable from the epistemology of modality. I am only pointing out that conceivability arguments can be equally treacherous when their conclusions invoke strong *epistemic* modalities, since thought-experiments of the kind I have just described can be viewed as simple, invalid conceivability arguments. I shall mention just three historical examples. the reader will have fun supplying others.

V

Saul Kripke argued that Leverrier acquired contingent but *a priori* knowledge that Neptune caused the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus if any planet did, or at least that this knowledge was both contingent and *a priori* in the semantic vicinity of his decision to use 'Neptune' as a name for whatever caused these observed perturbations.¹ If I understand what is meant in this context by *a priori*, the claim that it is known *a priori* (by a given person) that *x* is *F* implies that it is absolutely certain (for that person) that *x* is *F*. If the use of '*a priori*' here does not have at least this much affinity with the traditional concept of the *a priori*, then the term is ill-chosen.

It appears that Leverrier acquires this absolute certainty by performing the thought-experiment of trying to conceive Neptune—the very hypothetical planet introduced as "the cause of the perturbations"—being different in that respect, and failing. Unlike Mary, Leverrier did not see planetary astronomy develop in such a way that eventually the entry "causes the perturbations..." was rejected as a property of Neptune. But he was just luckier. Like Mary, he had no logical title to the conclusion that what was in fact a necessary condition for something being an object of his thought was instead a piece of absolutely certain knowledge.

So far as I can see, essentially this criticism of Kripke's view occurs in

Tamara Horowitz's paper "Stipulative Definition and Epistemic Privilege."²

VI

Descartes appears to have accepted the weak rationalist principle that God can realize any world-view that is absolutely certain. This is a dubious principle unless we can be assured that there will never be two secretly inconsistent world-views, each of them taken separately absolutely certain. I believe Descartes thought this cannot happen, and did not simply overlook the possibility, but I shall not try to argue that he did. It suffices for our purposes that he accepted the principle, rightly or wrongly.

This led him down his most famous primrose path. In the *Second Meditation*, concerned to make an epistemological point, he concocts a stunning sci-fi fantasy in which he exists but no material object exists. The "Descartes" character in this story is thus deprived of most of the kinds of characterizing features people tend to think of themselves as having and as mattering to who they are - appearance, behavioral habits, social history, and so on. Nothing is left but the modes of thought, albeit in the new, wide Cartesian sense of 'thought'. As a result Descartes cannot think away thought as a feature of himself, and draws the appropriate modally-phrased conclusion that he must think, cannot fail to think. At least this is so while he is meditating about how things would be were his sci-fi fantasy true. While that thought story is operative, thinking is just too big and central a part of the way he characterizes himself in his thought. To think that part away would be to lose himself as an object.

Unfortunately he believes he has discovered absolute certainty. To be precise, he believes he has identified as absolutely certain (for him) the world-view: I exist and think if there is matter and if there is not. God therefore can make it real that he exists although material objects such as his body do not.

These last moves do not occur in the *Second Meditation*, they occur in the *Sixth* (as he sometimes annoyedly points out). And they occur together with an application of the principle of real distinction to yield the final conclusion that he is not his body—in fact is not identical with any material thing.³ Some of this is defensible. Perhaps the real distinction is. Perhaps the weak rationalist principle even is, in the context of a certain theological conception of the relations of God and man. What is not at all defensible is mistaking a 'must' that expresses the necessity of some feature as a condition for the objectivity of thought for a strong epistemic 'must.'

VII

A commonplace of Cartesian epistemology, especially its empiricist variant, is that the subject of conscious experiences can know with a special authority that these experiences occur. I do not believe there is one, unified

explanation for the prevalence of this opinion. In one interesting range of cases, though, the idea of incorrigibility arises as a result of the kind of error I have been describing.

Traditional empiricism divides conscious experience up into, among other things, sensings. Commonplace examples are supposed to be cool feelings and pains. Sensings are not supposed to be knowings, or awarenesses. They are raw, uninterpreted. Nevertheless, they are identified by virtue of the subject "being appeared to" in some way. For example, someone who feels cool recognizes the presence of this feeling by being appeared cool to, or—less contortedly—seeming to feel cool. Being appeared to is a fully conceptual, classificatory mental event, not raw at all. Fairly standard empiricist doctrine is that (perhaps with a bit of attention to one's mental innards) a subject who seems to feel cool can be absolutely certain of feeling cool. Likewise for other sensings.

The argument takes the form of a thought experiment. Suppose that you seem to feel cool, (are "appeared cool to"). Is it conceivable that you manage this if you do not feel cool? Surely not. What could the sensation be that you seem to have if it is not the sensation of coolness? If you imagine the sensation you seem to have lacking the property of *being of coolness*, the sensation vanishes from your thought. You find yourself not seeming to have any sensation. If you imagine "it" being of warmth, for instance, then you imagine it seeming to you that you have another sensation.

This is all perfectly alright. It is not alright to add the next and last step to the argument, concluding that you are absolutely certain the sensation you seem to have is *of coolness*.

Whether a sensation can be imagined to lack the property of *being of coolness* depends in part on whether the person doing the imagining has our ordinary conceptual resources, or some other. Suppose we learn how to replace 'warm'-'cool' talk by sophisticated thermodynamic talk in our everyday discourse. Nothing would stop us, and everything would encourage us, to use the sophisticated vocabulary to characterize sensations as well. We might replace 'feel cool' by such things as 'feel in contact with something at low mean kinetic molecular energy', 'feel in contact with something of high specific heat', and several other locutions as well. In fact it is not easy to neatly relocate warmth and coolness in the ontology of physical theory, so we might deny their reality. In a parallel way we might deny that it is *cool* or *warm* that people feel, on the grounds that there is no coherent picture of thermal phenomena or thermal experience to which these notions are suited. At least the argument could be made, and made forcefully. People who then reported on their sensory states in terms of 'feeling cool' and 'feeling warm' would be conceptual dinosaurs, and even these dinosaurs might see the unreasonableness of their practice. For instance they might see the un-

reasonableness of framing their "appearance" thoughts in the old, outmoded terms, even if they continued to do so.

Such a person could have it seem to her she felt cool, all the while possessed of good reasons to believe it is not then, not ever, *cool* that she feels. It follows that a subject today who is "appeared cool to" cannot claim grounds for believing she does feel cool which must remain unimpeachable—that is, cannot claim absolute certainty. The appearance may be deceiving, not only in that evidence could be forthcoming that nothing is cool, but evidence may be forthcoming that nobody feels cool either.

The thought experiment fails for our usual reason. At present thermal sensation can be characterized only in a limited—and possibly inadequate—number of ways. Under such circumstances, one cannot think away *being of cool* as a property one applies in thought to characterize a thermal sensation. As always, absolute certainty is not guaranteed.⁴

VIII

In their details, these examples differ considerably from one another, and our fallacy comes into play in each case in a different way. Same fallacy, though, and it will get you if you don't watch out. Forewarned is forearmed.

NOTES

1. In 'Naming and Necessity,' *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. by Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Reidel, Dordrecht).
2. *Philosophical Studies* (1983), pp. 305-18.
3. The principle of real distinction says that any substances x and y which could be distinct really are distinct.
4. Perhaps the indebtedness of this section to the ideas of Paul Churchland is obvious.