

Peer Review

Review of: "What's in a Name? On the Problem of Meaning-Change"

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The essay debates the change of meaning, which is a common topic in philosophical discussions, especially in the philosophy of science. What distinguishes this paper is that it explicitly includes a moral dimension that is typically absent in these debates. The inclusion of this aspect is what makes the essay original. However, I have several issues with the article.

Apart from a brief reference to Kripke and Carnap, the author largely ignores all research on topics that would be relevant here, including linguistic studies on actual meaning change, psychological literature on conceptual development, philosophical literature on meaning change and conceptual engineering, literature on the moral dimensions of meaning, and literature on the central example of "woman." The whole paper does not even try to connect to any existing debate.

The author seems to assume that meaning can be given in the form of definitions. This position is highly problematic. If basic names could be defined, they would not add expressive power to a language. Most concepts have no clear definition, and psychological studies are much more compatible with alternative views (such as the prototype view or the exemplar view). The author should be more explicit about what even counts as a plausible theory of meaning and concept.

The factual claims in the paper are largely incorrect or at least unjustified:

The central example "complete human being": The author mentions no references to justify his claim that any meaning change is involved here. The first problem is that the named concept is actually a composition of several concepts, none of which changed their meaning in any relevant way. What might have changed are our beliefs about what counts as a complete human being, but not because of a change in meaning, rather a change in judgment. I am not even sure that there was ever a time when non-whites and non-males were denied the status of being a complete human being. The more historically accurate view seems to be that being a complete human was, at some point, not enough to

qualify for the full rights and moral status of a privileged person, commonly defined by cultural status and abilities. For example, a "Barbarian" was mainly conceived as lacking linguistic and cultural abilities, not as being only half a human being or so. Of course, all of this can be debated. The problem is simply that the author uses this example for a meaning change without showing that there is one involved.

The debate about prime numbers: This is simply based on an incorrect definition (confusing natural numbers and integers). It is worrying that this definition is found in a dictionary, but, as becomes clear in the footnotes, the author understands this is a mistake. I thus find it odd to assume this as the meaning of "prime number" within the main text.

The debate about gender and sex: This part is especially worrying. It is simply not true and never has been true that the meaning of "woman" is defined in terms of XX chromosomes. There are several problems with this position:

The development of the meaning of "woman" happened in total ignorance of genetic knowledge. The author would have to explain how genetics could then be the foundation of the meaning. Even today, only a few people know their genetic profile, and we do not know the genetic profiles of others. Arguably, it is difficult to know one's genes, but easy to know one's sex/gender. This is surprising if the genetic profile defines the meaning of "woman." The only way to explain this is if the essence of "woman" were in the genetic profile (to be discovered by science), with all the apparent features of womanhood being merely ways of identification (stereotypes in the sense of Putnam). This entails a strong form of natural kind realism and semantic externalism. However, semantic externalism is, however, hard to reconcile with the kind of meaning change the author debates.

The definition of womanhood in terms of XX chromosomes also fails for simple biological reasons. The definition excludes X-women (women with Turner syndrome) and any woman with trisomy X. The latter have quite normal sexual development and are fertile. The condition is not very rare, but many do not know they have it. Apart from that, the definition excludes all XY-women who have a female phenotype by birth, as well as XX men who have (also by birth) a male phenotype. This is a huge problem because the author wants to defend some biological concept of womanhood but ignores these biological facts.

The author contrasts what he calls the traditional understanding of "woman" with an emotional one. I do not deny that some people would like to go in this direction. However, there is a whole range of alternative conceptual possibilities, such as a phenotypical concept (a person who has a largely female

phenotype), which would include intersex women and trans women after medical transition, or a social definition (a person who lives in the social role associated with woman). All of them have their limitations. The point I would make is this: There is simply no definition of the term “woman,” beyond the trivial translation to “female adult.” There is ostensive learning by examples and prototypes, as is the case with most concepts in our language. Of course, there is a systematic link to a biological concept of female functions (producing larger gametes) and the standard genotype XX in humans, but this cannot define our natural language term “woman.”

Even though the topic - combining linguistic, moral, and ontological questions - is clearly fascinating, I think the paper is not very helpful.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.