The Pragmatic Constraints of Barnard and Horgan's "Truth as Mediated Correspondence"

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I. Introduction

Suppose Bob is driving to work when he sees the *check engine* light illuminate and notices smoke beginning to billow out of the vehicle's front-end. Bob, who knows next to nothing about cars, drives the increasingly disabled vehicle to a nearby mechanic shop. The mechanic assesses the vehicle's condition, noticing that the radiator contains no coolant. The mechanic possesses background knowledge Bob does not have, which informs him of what could possibly have gone wrong with Bob's car. Either there is no coolant in the radiator, the mechanic reasons, or there is something else damaged in the motor preventing coolant from reaching the radiator (perhaps a blocked line). It seems that the mechanic brings some background knowledge, working within a certain expert context, to the situation that Bob does not.

In "Truth as Mediated Correspondence" and, more recently, in "The Synthetic Unity of Truth," Robert Barnard and Terence Horgan have offered a revised correspondence conception of truth in order to adopt the correspondence theory's advantages while rejecting its disadvantages.[1] The aim of this paper is to illustrate some pragmatic constraints faced by interlocutors when working under different semantic frameworks. In this paper, first, I will summarize direct correspondence and compare it to Barnard and Horgan's notion of "mediated correspondence." Given that some language users sometimes operate under different contexts, I will show that truth as mediated correspondence might be mistaken. Doing so will require the introduction of a variety of examples. Along the way, I will contend with a potential objection that suggests Barnard and Horgan need not concern themselves with pragmatics. If within one conversation two contexts are operative, Barnard and Horgan need to provide a principle that allows individuals to recognize under which context the interlocutor is operating. Since they have not provided such a principle and my examples show something has gone wrong with truth as mediated correspondence we must either revise the notion of

mediated correspondence or abandon it.[2]

II. Direct Correspondence Theory of Truth

According to the direct correspondence theory of truth, a proposition is true if and only if it agrees with reality or it refers to something in the world. In this case, for example, the proposition "the automobile is malfunctioning" is true if there is something wrong with the car. The proposition "The cat is on the mat" is true when and only when there is a cat sitting on the mat. Hence, direct correspondence, generally, supposes that a proposition is true if the words that compose it denote mind-independently existing objects that are formed in a particular state-of-affairs. Direct correspondence requires truth-makers to link the object in the world with the proposition said about the world.

Direct correspondence theory of truth is subject to the usual criticisms one might level against it, so the challenge of contemporary truth theorists interested in defending it must employ a strategy to circumvent the typical worries. If the object does not exist making the proposition said about that object true, then, according to direct correspondence theorists, the proposition cannot possibly be true. When we are confronted by the proposition "the number six is even" or "Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street," since there are no objects that satisfy the terms "six" or "even" or "Sherlock Holmes," the proposition cannot be made true by the objects they supposedly denote. Instead, there has to be some kind of alternative explanation for the truth-values of propositions including fictional literary characters or propositions of mathematics. Thus, propositions about numbers or fictional characters, by the strict standards of direct correspondence, cannot possibly be true.

III. Truth as Mediated Correspondence

Overcoming the usual problems encountered by direct correspondence theories of truth has been the focal point of truth theorists interested in defending correspondence theory, but this is more difficult to do than it sounds given how many problems direct correspondence theory encounters, even besides the ones just mentioned regarding propositions including fictional characters and mathematics. Some correspondence theorists have offered potential responses to these criticisms, though they all seemingly have failed because of new problems that crop up (Cf. Austin 1950/2001, Alston 1997). Barnard and Horgan, in their revised correspondence theory, have attempted to circumvent some of these problems by proposing an alternative conception of the traditional notion of correspondence where the theory encapsulates an element of truth derived from one's conceptual scheme.

For Barnard and Horgan's truth as mediated correspondence, truth does not require direct linkage to the way the world is, i.e., with a proposition's truth-maker(s). They claim that:

> Correspondence is a relation between thought/language and the world that is mediated by one's conceptual scheme. … [M]ediated correspondence, for a given thought/sentence, is semantic correctness under contextually operative

> semantic standards. … [T]hus, the semantic correctness of a thought/sentence depends on which objects in the world instantiate which properties and relations. So, being semantically correct under contextually operative semantic standards is indeed a form of correspondence to the world, under a generic rubric of correspondence. (Horgan and Barnard 2006, 30f; cf. Terence Horgan and Matjaz Potrč, 2006, 47)

For Barnard and Horgan, they have in mind the "specific kind of mediated correspondence that counts as truth, in a given context of thought/discourse, is semantic correctness under the specific semantic-correctness standards at work in that context" (Horgan and Barnard 2006, 31). So, the truth of some propositions is at least partially obtained from those standards and principles operating within a certain context. Truth as mediated correspondence suggests that a proposition is true if and only if *either* (1) it corresponds with reality *or* (2) it fits into certain contextually operative semantics, and their mediated view contrasts with direct correspondence in that:

> the idea is that this is a form of correspondence that is mediated (to whatever degree) by one's conceptual scheme—as opposed to the direct, unmediated, form of correspondence that rests on referential relations between sub-propositional constituents of a thought/sentence and items in the correct ontology. (Horgan and Barnard 2006, 32)

Mediated correspondence is more permissive than its closely allied view, direct correspondence, because not only is a proposition true when it refers directly to the world but also when certain contextually operative standards are upheld by those trying to determine the truth or falsity of a proposition. Ultimately, according to the notion of truth as mediated correspondence, not all propositions correspond to the way the world is in the same way.

IV. Pragmatic Counterexamples to Mediated Correspondence

Suppose John schedules an appointment to see his doctor, Dr. Jane, because he has been feeling some chest pain. Dr. Jane orders John to get an x-ray, so she can evaluate his condition. She examines the x-ray, discovers an unusual white spot visible under the third rib, and concludes that John has a lung infection. Dr. Jane's diagnosis that John has a lung infection is informed by her background knowledge about what an infection looks like in an x-ray and how it can be treated. Dr. Jane's pointing out the infection on the x-ray to John seems useless because he fails to have the relevant background knowledge to understand much about what Dr. Jane refers to on the x-ray.[3]

Notice that John knows that she is referring to something in the x-ray, but he fails to *see* the object *as* an infection because he neither understands the object referred to by the term "infection" or the relevant background conditions that must be met for one to say that that thing on the x-ray is an "infection." John does not have the appropriate training to identify the infection on the x-ray, and, since this training is critical for understanding that the gray orb on the x-ray is properly identified as an infection and

that certain steps must be taken in order to relieve the patient of having the infection, whatever John may say about the x-ray is (at best) neither true nor false.

John does not have the background knowledge Dr. Jane has, so we might say that John and Dr. Jane operate under contextually distinct semantic frameworks. John knows that there is something in the x-ray. But, while John sees the fuzzy gray orb Dr. Jane does, he lacks the epistemic background context Dr. Jane has which enables her to conclude that the orb is a lung infection. Denotation functions properly in both individuals. In the case of Dr. Jane, however, the truth of the proposition involving the presence of a lung infection is mediated by Dr. Jane's expertise and her having the appropriate conceptual scheme to identify and diagnose the presence of certain maladies.

The word "infection" denotes the infection that can be observed as the fuzzy gray orb in the x-ray. This is enough for John to denote that the thing observed is the lung infection, but it is not enough to say of John that he understands what a lung infection is, what consequences might follow if it is left untreated, and the origin or cause of the lung infection. There is seemingly enough for Dr. Jane and John to be able to communicate with one another, at least in a thin way. When someone points at something, there are on some occasions missing pieces of meaningful semantical information permitting the rich exchange of ideas. The thin sense of communication is not a thick sense of communication. What I mean by a "thick" sense of communication is that the individuals conversing share a conceptual scheme, are able to judge whether a proposition is true in a mediated way, and have no trouble discerning when a proposition is true in virtue of what it denotes versus its being true in virtue of whether the interlocutors have relevantly pieces of similar background knowledge. It is this thick concept that must be operative within semantic contexts in order for truth as mediated correspondence to be semantically correct. So, it seems that Barnard and Horgan's mediated correspondence has been undermined by the counterexample, but that might be a bit too presumptuous.

Consider another example. Imagine two people, a father and his son, carrying on a conversation about what gifts it is that the child wants to receive from Santa Claus for Christmas. When the child uses the term "Santa Claus," he believes that there is a referent, an object, to which that particular term refers. According to the child, when someone utters the sentence "Santa Claus has a white beard," it is made true by the jolly old elf who has silvery-white facial whiskers. The child is incapable of escaping his restrictive direct correspondence worldview. If we were to ask the child whether Santa Claus refers to an actual object, the child would respond affirmatively. There is no reason for the son to believe that Santa Claus does not exist and that he must speak as if Santa Claus existed.

The father, however, operates under a different context driven by a particular counterfactual or subjunctive conditional the son fails to adopt. The father's context is the following. If Santa Claus were a real person and an actual object, then one would refer to him when employing the term "Santa Claus" in an utterance. Santa Claus is not a real person, so the term "Santa Claus" fails to denote any real truly existent object. Thus, when the father says, "Santa Claus has a white beard," the father operates within a standard where Santa Claus does not exist, even though he might admit that the prop-

osition, "Santa Claus has a white beard," is true. He would reason that if there were a Santa Claus, he would bear a white beard and because this would be the case under such conditions the proposition that declares such facts of the non-existent Santa Claus should be treated as true. Truth would be mediated by the father's conceptual scheme about Santa Claus, and his concept of truth is completely distinct from his son's notion of truth regarding Santa Claus because the child believes that the term "Santa Claus" refers directly to an existent object.

The father is operating within a certain paradigm that carries with it specific features operating upon him within a contextual framework, and these features govern how he interacts with his son. The father recognizes that the proposition "Santa Claus has a white beard" is true, but he further recognizes that other propositions about Santa Claus, such as "Santa Claus has a handlebar mustache" or "Santa Claus is a malevolent demon seeking to devour the souls of children," are false not because there is an object in the world that fails to exemplify these characteristics but because a fact integral to Santa Claus is his having a white beard. Facts that do not apply to Santa Claus include his being a malevolent demon and his having a handlebar mustache. When we speak of Santa Claus having a white beard, it is because that is the traditional and acceptable way of talking about Santa Claus. So, such a proposition declaring that Santa has a white beard is true.

The conversation between father and son exemplifies an interesting problem with Barnard and Horgan's promiscuous correspondence notion of truth. The trouble is in deciding when and in what context direct correspondence or mediated correspondence is operative. If it is possible, as it appears to be in the cases presented above, that the two forms of correspondence might be operative at the same time in one conversation, then one interlocutor might adopt direct correspondence while the other embraces mediated correspondence. In a later work, Barnard and Horgan (2013) have acknowledged this problem but dismiss it quite vaguely. They argue, "Once one acknowledges that conceptual mediation takes place… worries about how to distinguish the 'degree' of mediation from one discourse context from another becomes secondary" (Barnard and Horgan 2013, 6). Knowing how to individuate the true claim that "Krampus is a malevolent demon seeking to devour the souls of children" from the false claim that "Santa Claus is a malevolent demon seeking to devour the souls of children" seems difficult to do on Barnard and Horgan's view if we have not got a clear sense of the contextually operative standards that apply in certain circumstances or to what "degree." Thus, there seems to be a need for Barnard and Horgan to provide a bridging principle between the two notions of correspondence and an account of when these notions apply.

V. Pragmatics Ain't Semantics: A Counterargument on behalf of Barnard and Horgan

A defender of Barnard and Horgan might argue that the two notions are intimately connected in virtue of the fact that they are both correspondence theories. If this is what unifies the two, then Barnard and Horgan not only owe us a bridging principle between the different notions but also they need to respond to the usual objections that

correspondence theories face. So, this does not seem to be the most promising defense of truth as mediated correspondence.

Barnard and Horgan might argue in response that there are circumstances where we could employ either direct correspondence or mediated correspondence, and it is up to us when one of the two applies. Certainly, it seems confusing to permit an individual to decide whether direct or mediated correspondence applies. We seem incapable of making these sorts of judgments appropriately. There is a missing or implied bridging principle the view assumes is operative between direct and mediated correspondence. Unfortunately, we are left with the inability to explain the pragmatics of communication between interlocutors who operate under different contexts.

Finally, Barnard and Horgan likely believe that the way language functions is clearly and easily distinguishable from the semantic content of the truth notion. But, as I have tried to show, it is not clear just how distinct pragmatic implicature and contextually operative semantic standards are; the borderland region between the two might be quite blurry and vague. If individuals operate under different contextually operative semantic standards of truth, then the ability to communicate clearly might be impeded. Failure to communicate clearly might give rise to a violation of normative standards of communication, when individuals do not know or fail to understand the appropriate time at which to operate within one or the other context.

Consider a final example. When a theist utters the term "God," he believes the term denotes a specific divine entity, namely God. The atheist, on the other hand, speaks *as if* that entity exists, even though the term "God" for the atheist fails to denote anything. Thinking specifically about truth as mediated correspondence this is an instance where contextually operative standards are not shared among interlocutors. Given that individuals fail to share contextually operative standards, it seems to show a deficiency with mediated correspondence and their being more than one way for a proposition to be true. Thus, truth as mediated correspondence cannot get at the nature of the truth concept as Barnard and Horgan have suggested. In fact, it becomes evident that both Barnard and Horgan either need to provide a bridging principle between direct and mediated correspondence within the same operative contextual features or their view falls flat in recognizing the pragmatic features of communication between interlocutors.

VI. Conclusion

For Barnard and Horgan, there is a contextually operative semantic framework that enables us to derive what propositions are semantically correct under a specific context from those propositions that are not. If the propositions count as semantically correct under a specific context, then the proposition is true. If not, then the proposition is false. But, what happens when we operate under different frameworks or when we fail to recognize the traditional or acceptable meanings of terms? If my analysis is correct and Barnard and Horgan's view is mistaken, then we would not be able to distinguish the true claim, "Santa Claus has a white beard," from the false one, "Santa Claus has a handlebar mustache," or—worse yet—the true claim "John should meet me at the bank" (financial institution) from the false claim "John should meet me at

the bank" (river embankment). Just as Bob is unable to understand the mechanic, or John is unable to comprehend what a lung infection is, or the father and son speaking of Santa Claus either directly or indirectly, we cannot acquire truth from what is semantically correct since we cannot obtain correctness from contextually operative semantics. Barnard and Horgan are left with the burden to provide a bridging principle between direct and mediated correspondence in order to determine which form of correspondence is at work as to allow for the pragmatic features of a conversation.

Notes

1. An early version of "mediated correspondence" was provided in Horgan 2001, Horgan and Potrč 2000, 2006, and Horgan and Timmons 2002, which was called "indirect correspondence," and – like its progeny – permits for different kinds of correspondence. The object of my analysis will be Horgan's recent work with Robert Barnard (2006, 2012). Early ancestors of the view include Field (1972) and Devitt (1984).

2. Michael Lynch (2002) has presented a series of objections to indirect correspondence elsewhere, so I have attempted not to repeat those concerns in this paper.

3. It is unclear whether individuals working within one particular context always seem to share information with individuals working in other closely related particular contexts. For instance, when someone tells a joke to another person who is completely oblivious to why the joke is funny, it seems the other person cannot understand why the persons who "get it" cannot stop laughing. This seems to illustrate the claim the underdetermination of some contextual semantics. The other person required a certain context in order to properly appreciate the joke, but, since the person lacked the relevant background conditions that had to be met for the joke to be funny, the joke was not properly appreciated. Clearly, if I lack the operative context, I cannot possibly come to find the joke funny.

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