The Logic and Philosophy of So-Called Moral and Semantic Innocence

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Abstract.   Using semantic and syntactic methods, we prove the compatibility of the truth of universally quantified slurring sentences of the form ⌜all Ss are Ns⌝ or ⌜all Ss are S*s⌝ with the existential core of moral and semantic innocence. We also show that proving their mutual compatibility by means of logic leaves untouched the moral problem tied to their material truth. Finally, we trace the problem back to the failure to signal in the spelling of the slurring term's meaning that the derogatory concept it denotes is not universally accepted.

Keywords: moral and semantic innocence • slurs • quantificational logic • endorsement

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I

Semantic innocence — the account of the truth-conditions of sentences containing pejorative terms, notably those used to slur, put forward by Hom and May (2013; 2018) — is sometimes characterized as the thesis that all non-negated slurring sentences are false (Valtonen 2019, p.2, p.3 fn2). To be sure, non-negated atomic sentences such as "Woody Allen is a kike" or "Yao is a chink" (more generally, sentences of the form ⌜*a* is an S⌝, where "S" stands for a slurring predicate) and non-negated existential sentences such as "some Jews are kikes" or "some Chinese are chinks" (more generally, ⌜some Ns are Ss⌝, where "S" stands for a slurring predicate and N for its neutral counterpart) are false on Hom and May's account because the extension of the slurring predicate being the empty set, no particular referred to by the proper name (the individual constant) belongs to it, nor does it intersect with the extension of its neutral counterpart.

But how about sentences such as "all kikes are Jews" (more generally, ⌜all Ss are Ns⌝) or "all kikes are faggots" (more generally, ⌜all Ss are S*s⌝, where "S" and "S*" stand for different slurring predicates)? And how about intensional contexts such as

"John, who is a bigot, believes that Yao is a chink" (more generally, ⌜*j*, who is a bigot, believes that *a* is an S⌝) or "believing that Chinese people are chinks is racist" (more generally, ⌜believing that Ns are Ss is racist⌝)? Clearly, they are further instances of slurring sentences. Nevertheless, on Hom and May's account, they come out true, not false. Given both the null extension thesis (i.e., the thesis that the extension of slurring predicates necessarily is the null class or the empty set) and the semantic clauses for quantified sentences the account relies upon, the universally quantified slurring sentences come out trivially true when standardly analyzed as disguised conditionals.[1] And when it comes to intensional contexts, although the deliverances of the account are less clear, semantic clauses can be added that stipulate that they are true if and only if the embedded clause is true in all the possible worlds compatible with the bigoted/racist attitude held in the actual world. Since "Yao is a chink" and "Chinese people are chinks" are true in the relevant set of worlds, both embeddings come out true.[2]

It might be objected that the fact that non-negated slurring sentences come out true, not false on Hom and May's account is irrelevant to the thesis, semantic innocence being concerned — one might go on objecting — with the joint truth of existential sentences such as "no Jews are kikes", "there are no kikes", and "there are Jews" meant to capture, if sincerely uttered, the commonsensical beliefs of the non-bigot (see Hom and May 2013, pp.293–6; Orlando 2021, pp.160–2). Still, if the account is to embody something like a worldview — the view that no one is worthy of negative moral evaluation on account of being Jewish, Chinese, etc. and that slurring sentences mirror this fact —, it matters that beliefs expressed by means of universal quantifiers or doxastic embeddings the truth of which follows from both the null extension thesis (hereafter, NET) and standard semantic clauses for predicate logic be shown not to conflict with the existential core of moral and semantic innocence (hereafter, MSI).

In what follows, we give the proof both in model-theoretic terms and in syntactic format of the compatibility of the truth of universally quantified slurring sentences such as the ones pointed above with the existential core of MSI.[3]

II

Consider a slurring sentence such as "there are no kikes" the truth of which directly follows from the null extension thesis on the following clause: $\nexists(X) = T$ iff $ext(X) = \emptyset$.[4] Call it "*P*". Now consider another slurring sentence of the form ⌜all Ss are S*s⌝, say "all kikes are faggots". Call it "*Q*". It is easy to show that there is an interpretation *I* that satisfies both *P* and *Q*. Suppose, for simplicity's sake, that the (non-empty) domain *D* of *I* is a set with just one member and that, in accord with NET, the extensions of the predicates "kikes" and "faggots" in *I* are the empty set. *I*

is a model of P since P is satisfied by I: no member of D belongs to the extension of "kikes" in I. I is also a model of Q since the extensions of "kikes" and "faggots" being what they are, the antecedent of the conditional in Q is false, thereby turning the whole sentence true. In other words, Q is also (vacuously) satisfied by I. More importantly, it is easy to show that there isn't an interpretation that satisfies P that does not satisfy Q. As is known, the number of interpretations available for quantified formulas is determined by the number of elements in D, which in turn determines the number of instances for each formula. On the assumption that D is a singleton set, there is just one interpretation available for P and for Q — on which the extensions of "kikes" and "faggots" are the empty set. Since their respective instances (say, "Woody Allen is not a kike" for "There are no kikes" and "If Woody Allen is a kike, then he is a faggot" for "all kikes are faggots") are satisfied by this interpretation and since no other interpretation is available, it follows that there isn't an interpretation that satisfies P that does not satisfy Q.

The same point can be made in deductive fashion, thereby turning the argument in support of the compatibility claim even clearer. For the sake of argument and illustration, let us assume that D is the singleton set that has Woody Allen as the only member. Consider arguments A1 and A2 below.

[A1]
   [1] All Jews are kikes. (Hyp)
   [2] Woody Allen is a Jew.
   [3] Woody Allen is a kike. (From 1 and 2)
   [4] There are kikes. (From 3, by existential generalization)

[A2]
   [5] All kikes are Jews. (Hyp)
   [6] Woody Allen is a Jew.
   [7] Woody Allen is a kike.
   [8] There are kikes. (From 7, by existential generalization)

In A1, there is a way to infer [4] in a small number of steps from [1] and [2], which means that the argument is manifestly valid. Since the conclusion, however, straightforwardly contradicts the sentence "there are no kikes" the truth of which directly follows from NET (on the aforementioned singular clause), A1 might be thought to threaten NET and, thereby, semantic innocence. But it is worth remembering that [1], while intuitively true from the bigot's perspective, comes out materially false on Hom and May's account. Since the premise is false, the conclusion is not forced on us. Therefore, A1 is no threat to MSI, understood as Hom and May understand it. A2 is no threat to MSI either, yet for different reasons. In contrast to [4] in A1, [8]

cannot be derived from [5] and [6]. The crucial step here is [7]. Inferring it from [5] and [6] would commit one to the fallacy of affirming the consequent. As is known, an argument that instantiates such inference pattern is formally invalid. So, in A2 MSI is compatible with the truth of [5] not because the argument isn't sound, but because the attempt to derive [8] from [5] is unsuccessful.

III

That the truth of (assertoric utterances of) universally quantified slurring sentences can be proved to be compatible with its existential core is, on the face of it, good news for MSI. Still, the proof does not settle the moral problem arising from the fact that those sentences are deemed materially true, that is, true regardless of the bigot's perspective.[5] Of course, if a non-bigot is told that the slurring sentences under scrutiny are true, they are fully justified in rejecting them as false (or in refusing to endorse them) even if the sentences happen to be materially true, for, a sufficient reason to reject something as false (or to refuse to endorse it) is that it be *held* false. But if the slurring sentences under scrutiny are true for set-theoretic reasons, this means that they are endorsable by any speaker (thinker) even when those speakers (thinkers) are not prone to endorse them, as happens with the non-bigot. This is, clearly, an unwelcome consequence of the account and, obviously, a proof of the compatibility of their material truth with the existential core of MSI does nothing to soften the feeling of unease — to put it mildly — felt by the non-bigot. In the upcoming section, we provide a diagnosis of the predicament.

IV

It is not hard to figure out where the flaw lies. It lies in the failure to signal in the analysis of the corresponding derogatory concept that it is not universally accepted, therefore not universally endorsable when the corresponding slurring sentence is deemed materially true. On Hom and May's analysis, the concept referred to by the slurring term S is a first-order function, outcome of the combination of a second-order function (*deserves negative moral evaluation*) and a first-order function (*being N*), that maps every argument to the False. For instance, the slurring term "kike" refers to the first-order derogatory concept *deserves negative moral evaluation for being Jewish* and maps Woody Allen or Saul Kripke to the False. The slurring term's extension being, on the same account, the empty set, MSI is safe, for no one deserves negative moral evaluation for being Jewish, Chinese, or homosexual. Still, nothing in the first-order concept referred to by S signals that the evaluation is not shared by everyone, in particular by non-bigoted speakers (thinkers). This sounds like an unnecessary concession the unwelcome moral consequences of which come to the fore with the material truth of universally quantified slurring sentences of the form ⌜all Ss are Ns⌝

or ⌜all Ss are S*s⌝. The null extension thesis does nothing to soften the feeling of unease attached to their truth: it comes too late![6]

V

To wrap up, we have been arguing that the characterization of semantic innocence as the thesis that all non-negated slurring sentences are false is wrong, for there are a bunch of non-negated slurring sentences that come out true, not false, on Hom and May's account. For instance, sentences of the form ⌜all Ss are Ns⌝, ⌜all Ss are S*s⌝ or ⌜*j*, who is a bigot, believes that *a* is an S⌝. Helping ourselves to the standard model-theoretical framework Hom and May (presumably) work in, we provided a logical proof of the compatibility of their truth with the existential core of MSI. This, however, does not settle the moral problem tied to the fact that the derogatory content(s) encoded by the sentences under scrutiny, if true, is (are) supposedly endorsable by any thinker, non-biased ones included. This is, clearly, an unwelcome consequence that stems, or so we argued, from the failure to signal in the lexical analysis of *S* that the negative moral evaluation is not shared by speakers unkeen to use *S*. If we are right, this points to the shortcomings of a purely technical (i.e., logical) solution to the problem rather than to the limitations of quantificational logic.

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Notes

[1]It might be objected that since the presupposition that ⌜there are Ss⌝ or ⌜there are S*s⌝ (or both) fails on their account, they are truth-valueless rather than true. In our view, they still

may come out true provided the existential import of the universal quantifier is dealt with as a side-thought (that is, a thought psychologically connected with, yet not part of the main, semantically encoded thought) rather than a presupposition. On this Fregean alternative, see Horn (2007), Karttunen (2016, p.709 fn8), and Sander (2020).

[2]Note that the embedded sentences need not be themselves true. This is fortunate since, on the clauses for extensional contexts, "Yao is a chink" and "Chinese people are chinks" are false.

[3]For lack of space, we leave the proof of the compatibility of the truth of doxastically embedded slurring sentences with the core of MSI for another time.

[4]"X" stands for a concept (be it or not a slurring one).

[5]On Hom and May's account (see 2018, pp.126–7), slurring sentences of the form ⌜all Ss are Ns⌝ are both intuitively and materially true (i.e., true both from and regardless of the bigot's perspective, since the empty set is a subset of any set), while slurring sentences such as "all kikes are Mormons" are materially true (for the same reasons), yet intuitively false. We gather that, on the same account, slurring sentences of the form ⌜all Ss are S*s⌝ are true both from and regardless of the bigot's perspective, since the empty set is a subset of itself.

[6]In other words, "what is needed", as Kortum (2013, p.110) correctly points out in a different context, "is a form of words that makes clear that this is a *racist* concept". And a possible way out would be, as Kortum (2013, p.110) goes on suggesting, to add in the analysis of the corresponding concept that the person is held so by anyone who uses the slurring term "*S*".

Acknowledgments