WORDS AND THE WORLD: A CRITIQUE OF STRAIGHT SOLUTIONS TO KRIPEK’S MEANING SCEPTICISM

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Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository**, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Abstract

Saul Kripke has argued in favour of constitutive scepticism regarding the existence of meaning. This scepticism is paradoxical in that the more successful it is, the more it undermines its own conclusion. This thesis investigates whether it is possible to produce a satisfactory ‘straight’ solution to this paradox. In this context, a straight solution is one that refutes or disproves the basis of the scepticism by providing the fact, or facts, in virtue of which our words have determinate meaning.

The problem of meaning scepticism produces numerous difficulties. It undermines non-theoretic conceptions of language and communication. An example of this is the idea that there is such a thing as meaning something by a particular word. Meaning scepticism also presents serious difficulties for any philosophical theory that relies upon either semantic realism or determinate meaning. Kripke’s own ‘sceptical’ solution does not refute his scepticism. This thesis examines Kripke’s solution to determine whether it alleviates the negative effects of the paradox, and whether it entails further problematic implications of its own. Based on existing accounts of meaning, existing responses to the sceptical challenge are subject to critical examination to test whether they can solve the problem in a satisfactory manner. Based on adaptations of existing theories, three novel solutions are presented and critically examined.

It is argued that the sceptical solution that Kripke proposed does not alleviate all of the concerns produced by meaning scepticism. Further, this solution entails a particularly problematic form of anti-realism. All existing accounts of meaning fail to address the sceptical problem. Of the three novel solutions presented, two are argued to be problematic, one particularly so. The last solution presented, based on a causal theoretic approach, is argued to be the best option for addressing the problem of meaning scepticism. This conclusion not only refutes Kripke’s scepticism, but also supports the connection between language and the world that speakers describe when using it.