Commentary on D. Morgan, "A Demonstrative Model of First Person Thought"

Edison Barrios

Morgan, in a very stimulating paper, defends what he dubs "The Demonstrative Model" (henceforth 'DeM'), that is, the thesis that what determines the reference of first-person thoughts is "our ways of gaining knowledge of ourselves", among which are proprioception and kinesthesia.[1]

Morgan's argument for this view draws on the "knowledge-maximization principle" (let's call it 'K-max'), an interpretive principle due to Williamson (Williamson, 2008), that regulates assignments of reference to content-bearing items such as utterances and judgments. This principle says that "assignments of reference ought to maximize knowledge". Thus, for any thought t, what determines whether it refers to object o, as opposed to any other object (or to anything at all) is whether assigning t to o will make t count as knowledge.

So, consider the thoughts that can be expressed with sentences like (1)–(3) below:

(1) I'm hungry.

(2) My legs are crossed.

(3) My left arm is numb.

Assignments of reference based on proprioception allow us to count these thoughts as knowledge (which wouldn't necessarily happen if we based our assignments on visual perception or tarot readings). The object of which proprioception gives knowledge can be no other than the thinker him/herself, and so the object or referent of (1)–(3)[2] must be the thinker as well.

In consequence, since—*as per* K-max—what determines the choice of reference assignment is knowledge maximization, then what determines that first person thoughts will refer to the thinker—as opposed to something else, or nothing at all—is precisely proprioception, *qua* source of knowledge.

[1] In what follows I will use the term 'proprioception' to include kinesthesia, interoception and the rest.

[2] Read: 'the object of the thoughts whose content can be expressed with these sentences'.

Moreover, Morgan claims that what *explains* the referential association between thoughts like (1)–(3) and proprioception is the maximization of knowledge that results from assigning the object of proprioception (i.e. the thinker) as the referent of the thoughts.

DeM is presented as an alternative to the "Simple Rule Model" ('SR', from now on), which says that "first-person thoughts are governed by the rule that any token of one will be about the person who produces that token".

Morgan recommends DeM over SR on the grounds that: (a) both proposals are descriptively equivalent (i.e. they invariably yield the same reference assignments), and (b) DeM is explanatorily more powerful than SR. This explanatory advantage stems from the fact that SR takes the association between first-person thought and its object as a brute fact, whereas DeM offers an account of it, in terms of the maximization of knowledge that results from proprioception-based reference assignments. Furthermore, possible extensions of SR (such as the "Simple Rule Plus" model, which is a combination of features of both models) that would cover the same ground as DeM are still at a disadvantage, in terms of explanatory potency and simplicity.

In the sections that follow a will present a series of remarks, which on the whole are more methodological than substantive. The plan for the rest of this commentary is as follows: In section (1) I will raise questions concerning the strategy used by Morgan to establish DeM. In particular, I will discuss reasons for questioning the role assigned to K-max.

Then, in section (2), I will address the nature of the paper's leading questions. I note that there are two ways in which Morgan formulates his question: on one of them the problem concerns the *determination* of reference, whereas on the other it concerns the *enablement* of reference. I also note that those formulations are not mere terminological variants, but actually involve distinct issues. whose differences are relevant to the comparison of DeM and SR. In his paper Morgan has argued (cogently, I think) that a view such as SR—but not DeM—leaves certain important facts about first person content unexplained. However, in section (3) I criticize the suggestion that DeM does all the descriptive and explanatory work that a semantical proposal such as SR are supposed to do, thus putting such proposals out of the reference-determining business. On the contrary, there are aspects of first-person reference that require an explicitly semantic treatment of the kind that SR—but not DeM—aspires to provide.

Thus, I argue that, although DeM and SR are presented as directly opposed views, there are good reasons for thinking that they are *not*, and that they are not meant to perform the same functions in description and explanation. Furthermore the tendency to conflate the two kinds of questions distinguished above is partly responsible for the impression that DeM and SR are in direct competition.

Thus, given the different concepts they draw on, and the conceptual tools they exploit, they (or rather, the kinds of theory they represent) are suitable for making different yet complementary contributions to an understanding of first

person reference. Moreover each kind of theory is indispensable for a complete picture of the phenomena at hand, since neither of them can fill the other's role.

1 Knowledge-Maximization

I think we should avoid the strategy of supporting views that are already plausible (i.e. that proprioception enables self-reference and other related phenomena in humans) by means of theses whose status is less obvious or more controversial, and whose defense requires elaborate argumentation or the adoption of contentious theoretical commitments (such as K-max).[3] There are occasions in which such strategy may have a place, but that is usually the case when some skeptical challenge is at issue.[4] However, no skeptical possibility has been raised (as opposed to merely being hinted at) as a motivation for DeM, so one may wonder: (a) whether something like K-max is *needed* for establishing DeM, (b) what the advantages are of adopting such strategy, (c) whether the theory of reference should be the arbiter in matters of reference. Finally, it is not obvious to me why we should think that the role played K-max is *explanatory*. Perhaps such a role is provided for if one assimilates the task of explaining facts about reference to the task of rationalizing or providing a justification for certain judgments about reference. In the end, I suppose, the answers to these questions depend on fundamental assumptions about the nature of content and the goals of semantic inquiry. [5]

2 Questions of Enablement vs. Questions of Selection

The next issue I wish to address is the nature of the question that drives the discussion. Such question is formulated in several places, sometimes explicitly and other times implicitly, by giving an answer that makes reference to a question. These formulations vary in terms of vocabulary. For instance, on some occasions the question is framed in terms of determination (as in Q1) below, whereas in others it is framed in terms of enabling (as in Q2 below).

(Q1) What *determines* the reference of my 1st person thoughts?

[3] At the very least I suspect there are some who would accept the DeM (or something like it, framed in terms of information, for instance) but would take issue with the project of deriving or grounding content on interpretive principles.

[4] Indeed Williamson's introduction of K-max is preceded by a discussion of strategies for dealing with judgment skepticism.

[5] If one is not primarily motivated by normative concerns, one might contemplate a story in which information is the basis for both reference and knowledge. Under such a view, proprioception would ground both self-reference and self-knowledge, as it would seem to be an obvious candidate to fulfill that role, and thus it would shed light on the presumed association between reference and knowledge. (Note that this very rough sketch is not being put forward or endorsed here, as it is just an illustration).

(Q2) What *enables* me to latch onto myself in first person thought?

Morgan seems to treat these two formulations as if they were variants of the same question. However, they may differ in relevant ways, depending on how they are understood. A reference-determination question such as Q1 is analogous to questions such as: "what fixes the reference of a token/occurrence/utterance of 'now' at a particular speech context?". Of course, Q1 concerns thought, not language, so neither utterances nor conversational contexts are part of the picture. Still, one could treat some aspects of the intentional content or objects of thought tokens, and their constituents, as a sort of semantic value. With this in mind Q1 translates into "what determines the semantic value of any given first person thought?", and as raising the question of why a thought took o, and not u as a value on the occasion of its tokening. Let us call questions of this kind, such as Q1 "questions of selection" (or alternatively, questions of determination proper).

Q2, in contrast, is what we could call a question of enablement. Such questions inquire into the conditions that make some phenomenon possible.[6] In this sense, Q2 has the import of "what *makes it possible* for a first person thought to refer to x? Here the question can be specific to a given object, e.g. "what makes it at all possible for me to refer to *myself* (as opposed to, say, my neighbor's ferret) in first person thought?", or very general: "what allows me to *refer* (at all) when I instantiate a first person thought)?

Thus, we are in the presence of two distinct kind of questions, which, as a norm, are capable of receiving different answers.[7]

However—as Morgan notes—in the particular case of first person thought, a response to the enabling question is by itself enough to answer questions of determination. This is because, once the reference-determining mechanisms have been settled on, there is no selection to be made, no singling out to do (in contrast with cases of perceptual reference) since only one value is possible. So, there is no need to contemplate a separate determining rule, simply because

[6] For instance, consider the fact that a cheetah can run faster than 60 mph. Question 1: What enables the cheetah to run at N mph? (what makes it possible for it to be a fast runner?). The answer here might mention the musculo-skeletal structure of the animal, etc. Compare with "what determines whether, a cheetah, at a given chase, will actually reach 60 mph?". Here we could cite factors such as whether it was hunting or fleeing another animal, or what kind of animal it was, whether it was young or adult, whether it was healthy or sick, etc. Likewise, compare questions such as "What makes it possible for me to focus my attention (visually) on the door that is to my right ?" (or "what allows me to attend to any visual object at all?"), with ones such as "what makes it the case that at this moment I am focusing my attention on *that door*? or as "what makes it the case that right now I am *attending* to something via vision?". The same issue plays itself in the case of linguistic reference: "what allows me to have a visual demonstrative thoughts? vs. "what determines the reference of any such thought token?

[7] Morgan (p.c.) is aware of the distinctions I've just hinted at, of course. Still, I think that his discussion of reference determination would benefit from an explicit acknowledgement of the differences between the questions.

there is no work left for it to do. Hence, SR is superfluous and DeM gets the upper hand in the debate (this is similar in spirit, I think, to the "turning of the tables" dialectic in section II).

However, sameness of answer does not entail sameness of question. Nor does this mean that we should collapse the distinction between enablement and determination questions. It doesn't mean, either that the DeM can do all the work that proposals such as SR are intended to do, for reasons to be discussed in the next section.

3 Problems and Answers

The DeM directly addresses the question of what makes first-person thoughts possible, and this question is answered by citing mechanisms that *allow* one to be the object one's thoughts. In doing so, it addresses important issues in the epistemology of first-person thought, in a way that is parallel to proposals concerning the possibility of thought and reference in other domains (perceptual, memory, testimony).

In contrast, SR is (simply) addressing the less exciting question: "which thing does a first person thought refer to?", where the answer is "first-person thoughts are governed by the rule that any token of one will be about the person who produces that token". However the significance of this very simple rule only emerges when we view it against the background of a larger (psycho)semantic system of which it is a component. Such a system includes analogous rules for the interpretation of second person thoughts, 'now'-thoughts, 'here'-thoughts, etc., where each rule assigns content on the basis of the values taken by specific contextual variables.

A rule of such kind—though not necessarily SR as it stands—is, relevant for systematic attempts at exploring certain logical, semantical and pragmatic properties of mental indexicals. Thus, this SR, even if unexciting on its own, is better seen as part of an answer to a more ambitious *psychosemantic problem*.

The DeM—as noted above— also entails an answer to the determination ("which") question, when conjoined with the fact that proprioception can only provide knowledge about one object (i.e. thinker), However, this gives us an indirect, nonsemantical way of deriving consequence about reference assignment. This reference-determination method lacks some of the properties of proposals of a more semantic nature. This indirectness, and its significance, is brought about when one considers thoughts such as these:

(4) I am not thinking this thought.

(5) I am not the thinker of this thought.

(6) I am not proprioceiving myself.

(7) I am hungry but I am not proprioceiving myself.

(8) I am walking but I have no legs.

All of the examples above are puzzling, but they are not all puzzling in the same way. Thus, (4) and (5) evoke a sort of puzzlement that is different from the one one gets from (6) and (7). These two thoughts are almost certainly guaranteed to be false, given the way human thinkers are built, and in this respect they are similar to (8). In contrast, (4) and (5) are bizarre in view of their intrinsically self-defeating nature, due to reasons that are fundamentally semantic or pragmatic. In this sense they pattern with linguistic examples such as(9)–(11):

(9) I'm not speaking now [uttered by anyone, anywhere, anytime].

(10) I am not referring to myself [uttered by anyone, anywhere, anytime].

(11) EB never writes about himself in the third person [written by EB].

But the difference between those two sources of puzzlement cannot be captured unless one alludes to *bona fide* semantic and pragmatic (i.e. meaning-related) features that can capture the logic of indexical systems in language and thought (such as the ones invoked by SR-like rules, but not by DeM).

Now, remember that DeM was able to mimic first-person rules in their reference-assignments, and that this depended on the fact that one can only receive proprioceptive information about oneself, thus narrowing down the set of possible referents down to one: the thinker. But this is a contingent fact, due to the actual wiring of our nervous system, among other things. The implications of this contingency and what it means for the comparison between semantic accounts and the DeM can be highlighted by the following scenario: we could at least conceive of intelligent beings whose constitution prevented their ways of gaining self-knowledge from guaranteeing a unique referent, but who nonetheless were able to enjoy first person thought, in such a way that (4) and (5), for instance, would also be self-defeating for them. If so, then they would be adequately characterized (at least in part) by SR or some homologous rule, but not necessarily by DeM. [8]

In the end, we should see DeM and SR, not as alternatives, but as two resources we can draw on for an understanding of first-person thought. A SR-like proposal will invoke a relevant role R that defines the relation between thinker and self-directed thought (pick your favorite: thinker, producer, agent), and , for any given thought, it will instruct us to find R. But then, how do we determine the identity of this R, to whom the interpretation is tied? The SR is silent in this regard, but DeM would tell us: inquire within.

[8] Of course, these conceivability-driven speculations must be taken for what they are worth. Additionally these considerations might lose much of their force if DeM ties reference determination, not to the knowledge/information channels that we actually have, and which are linked to our biological makeup, but to *any possible way* of gaining self-knowledge by any sentient being. But if this is the case, then the proposal also loses much of its interest and explanatory appeal.

References

Williamson, Timothy. 2008. *The philosophy of philosophy*, volume 2. Wiley-Blackwell.