Some Observations About The Exam

Question (1)

A common failing of many of those writing on question (1) was to misunderstand Kripke's reasons for supposing that 'The standard meter is one meter long' or 'Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius' is a contingent truth (albeit knowable a priori). The mistaken reasons often given were that we might have used the boiling point of some liquid other than water as our basis for the Celsius scale, or that we might have used the term 'meter' to refer to some other length than the one we in fact use it for. These points are entirely irrelevant. One might just as well argue that '2 + 2 = 4' is contingent because we might have used the symbol '4' as the name of a different number (the number 17, perhaps?). If that was how we decided whether something is necessary or contingent, everything would be contingent. ('Cicero is Cicero' is contingent since we might have used the word 'is' to mean 'outweighs', for example.)

Suppose that stick *S* is the standard meter stick, and you want to show that it is only a contingent truth that *S* is one meter long. It is bizarre to suppose that the way to show this is to argue that we might have chosen a different length (say, 20 inches) to be the one we dub 'one meter'. Consider an analogous case. Shaquille O'Neal is over 7 feet tall. This is true, but only contingently so. Why? The obvious answer is that he might not have been that tall; there is a possible world in which Shaq never grew to be more than 6′8″. Would you answer: "the reason why it's only a contingent truth that Shaq is over 7′ tall is that we might have meant something quite different by 'one foot', in which case he could have been exactly the same size he actually is, but that wouldn't be 7 feet tall"? That would seem to be a bad joke. The contingency lies in the variability of human height, its dependence on nutrition and other local conditions, etc. It does not lie in the fact that we might have given our words different meanings.

To answer the Kripke question as those mentioned in the first paragraph did is to make the same mistake. What makes the truth that *S* is one meter long only a contingent truth is that *S* is a physical object whose dimensions can vary depending on local conditions. There is a possible world in which *S* is longer (or shorter) than one meter. That is what makes '*S* is one meter long' contingent. 'One meter' is a rigid designator; 'the length of *S*' is non-rigid. (Compare: '7 feet' is a rigid designator; 'the height of Shaquille O'Neal' is non-rigid.)

Question (4)

Those writing on question (4) did very well for the most part, but there was a widespread mistake made by many people, even those who otherwise did very well. The mistake came in setting out the proposition expressed by a context-dependent utterance; those who made the mistake failed to provide a separate content for each parameter of the context. In particular, where the context includes an agent, a time, and a location, and the character of the utterance is to ascribe a property *P* to the agent of the utterance at the

time of the utterance and at the location of the utterance, then the proposition expressed will be an ordered n-tuple <*a*, *t*, *l*, *P*>, where *a* is the agent, *t* is the time, *l* is the location, and *P* is the property. So, for example, if the utterance is "I was not here yesterday" and the agent is Bill, the time is June 5, the location is NYC, the property will be expressed by the 3-place predicate: '*x* is at location *y* at time *z*'. (For simplicity's sake, I will abbreviate that property as '*being at*'.) The proposition expressed, then, is <Bill, June 4, NYC, ~*being at*> (where '~' expresses negation). The mistake many of you made was to identify the proposition as an ordered triple: <Bill, June 4, ~*being at NYC*>.

This may seem like a very minor point, since the location is packed into the property being ascribed, but there is an important theoretical difference. For if we change the context to one in which the location is different, an utterance of the same sentence-type should have exactly the same character (although its content will be different). In particular, in whatever context this sentence is uttered, it ascribes the same property (albeit to a different agent at a different time and a different place). So if Sue utters this sentence on May 8 in Boston, she is ascribing to herself (at that place and on the prior day) the same property Bill was ascribing to himself on June 5 in NYC: the property of not being at the place of utterance on the day before the day of utterance. So the location of utterance cannot be part of the property ascribed, or else Sue, in saying "I was not here yesterday," would be saying that she was not in NYC on May 7. But that's not what she said: she said that she wasn't in Boston on May 7.

Question (7)

Although almost everyone who wrote on Grice did quite well, there was a fairly pervasive notion among you—mistaken, it seems to me—that there are some sentence types that are just plain implicature-free. (Those who claimed this did not explicitly say that they had sentence-types in mind, but they made no effort to point out that they were talking about only certain tokens, since they did not appeal to the conversational setting in support of their claim. And, besides, the claim is trivial with respect to sentence tokens.) The idea seemed to be that straightforward descriptive assertions like "The cat is on the mat" or evaluations like "John is a nice guy" or invitations like "Let's go get dinner" are implicature free. But it is sentence-tokens, not sentence-types, that are the bearers of conversational implicature. (This is not the case with conventional implicatures; that's one of the key differences between them.) Place any one of these allegedly implicature-free sentences in the right conversational setting and you will find implicatures. Examples:

A: I've redecorated my living room; do you notice anything new?
B: The cat is on the mat.

[B has implicated that there is nothing in the redecoration that is an improvement or even worthy of comment.]

A: I'm thinking of hiring John to play the saxophone at my wedding—what do you think? Is he a good musician?
B: John is a nice guy.

[B has implicated that John is not much of a musician.]

A: How would you like to go out dancing?
B: Let's go get dinner.

[B has not said that she would not like to go out dancing, but she has implicated as much.]

I would contend that there is no sentence-type all of whose tokens are guaranteed to be free of conversational implicatures. Put into the right conversational setting, any sentence can carry an implicature.