

Against descriptivism: Kripke

KRIPKE'S MODAL ARGUMENT. Note first one consequence of descriptivism in its cluster version—construed as a thesis about the meaning of proper names. If the meaning of a name 'NN' is exhausted by a set $\{d_1, \dots, d_n\}$ of descriptions, then we let D be a complex description 'the thing of which the claims "It is d_1 ", ..., "It is d_n " are true'. Then we have that, since:

If D exists, then D is D (5-1)

is a necessary truth, so must be the statement:

If NN exists, then NN is D . (5-2)

The implication here works by replacing ' D ' with 'NN' in the relevant occurrences.

And this consequence is unacceptable. Let D_F be 'the founder of the Soviet Union'. The statement:

If Lenin existed, then Lenin was D_F (5-3)

is not necessarily true. Lenin might have spent all his life in Simbirsk studying Greek grammar. In such a scenario, the antecedent of (5-3) is true, but the consequent is false. Hence the whole statement is false in this scenario. Hence the statement is not necessarily true. Therefore, this family of descriptions does not give the meaning of the name 'Lenin'.

More generally, there is no complex description D such that:

- (1) The referent of 'Lenin' is the unique individual who satisfies most, or a sufficient number, of the simple descriptions in D ;
- (2) Ordinary speakers associate D with Lenin, believing its referent to be the unique individual who satisfies most of the descriptions in D ;
- (3) A statement like (5-3) expresses a necessary truth.

If this is right, then the cluster view is false, and names are not synonymous with descriptions associated with them by ordinary speakers.

The key notion of the modal argument is the notion of a *rigid designator*.

Rigid designation. A singular term t is a rigid designator of an object x iff t designates x in all worlds in which x exists, and t never designates anything else.

Test for rigidity. A singular term ' t ' is a rigid designator iff the individual who is t could not have existed without being t , and no one who is not the individual who is t could have been t is true; otherwise t is non-rigid.

Remark 1 (Use and mention). The way we put the rigidity test is formally problematic. The correct formulation should begin as follows: Let ' t ' be the name of the term t . Then, a singular term ' t ' is a rigid designator iff etc. (If this remark is obscure, you can ignore it, and instead just attend to the examples.)

Example 2 (Rigidity). No one else other than Lenin could have been Lenin. Hence 'Lenin' is a rigid designator. But someone else other than the founder of the Soviet Union could have been the founder of the Soviet Union (for example, Trotsky). Hence the expression 'the founder of the Soviet Union' is not a rigid designator.

These claims sound unduly quizzical. Let us expand on them a bit. We say: No one else other than the *actual individual* Lenin could have been Lenin in any possible circumstance. Someone else might have done many of the things that Lenin actually did—i.e. satisfy many of the descriptions we attach to Lenin in the actual world. He could have founded the Bolshevik party, led the first Soviet government, married Krupskaya. And he indeed could have taken the pseudonym 'Lenin', while Lenin might have, in those circumstances, remained 'Ulyanov'! But no matter how hard he tried, that would not have made him Lenin (though it would have made him 'a person called "Lenin"', which is a different matter). According to the definition above, this makes the name 'Lenin' a rigid designator. And we have just admitted that though the expression 'the founder of the Soviet Union' designates Lenin in the actual world, it may well have designated someone else in some other possible world. Thus this expression is not a rigid designator.

Based on the examples such as these, Kripke claims that proper names function semantically as rigid designators, but that no description is such a rigid designator.

The modal argument can schematically be stated as follows:

- (1) Proper names are rigid designators.
- (2) If a description D gives the meaning of a term t , then: D is rigid iff t is.
- (3) No description is a rigid designator.
- (4) So, the meanings of proper names are not given by descriptions.

KRIPKE'S EPISTEMIC ARGUMENT. The problem of error already evident in the Frege-Russell view goes further than the cluster-description theorist believes. If the meaning of 'NN' is exhausted by *D*, then, according to the cluster view, anyone who believes the proposition '... NN ...' would also believe the proposition '... *D* ...'. Furthermore, the proposition 'If *D* exists, then *D* is *D*' is knowable a priori. Hence, the proposition 'If NN exists, then NN is *D*' should also be knowable a priori. Kripke rejects these claims.

Suppose that the only thing I know about Lenin is that he was the founder of the Soviet Union who died in 1924 (Kripke's own example is the Gödel/Schmidt scenario in pp. 83-4). Again, suppose my belief is false. Historians discover that Lenin did not die in 1924, but went to live abroad in Baden-Baden. So, whereas my belief that Lenin died in 1924 is falsified empirically, my belief that the founder of the USSR who died in 1924 did die in 1924 is not, and can not, be falsified empirically. Therefore, the propositions:

Lenin died in 1924 (5-4)

and

The founder of the USSR, who died in 1924, died in 1924 (5-5)

are not the same.

In many instances most or all of our important beliefs about historical figures can be challenged. A sceptic may say: 'All we believe about Moses is inaccurate'. But the cluster-description theorist would have to argue that such a statement is false, whatever evidence is presented. It is by definition—or more cautiously, by linguistic rules—that the 'most important' properties are correctly attributed to Moses. And such a claim is absurd.

The epistemic argument can now schematically be stated as follows:

- (1) When *D* is a description concerning important characteristics of the referent of a name 'NN', the following does not hold:
 - (a) One knows or believes the proposition 'NN is *F*' iff one knows or believes the proposition '*D* is *F*';
 - (b) The proposition 'If NN exists, then NN is *D*' is knowable a priori.
- (2) Therefore, descriptions related to important characteristics of the referents of proper names do not give their meanings.
- (3) Since these are the descriptions commonly associated with proper names by speakers, the cluster view is false, and the meanings of proper names are not given by descriptions speakers associate with them.

KRIPKE'S SEMANTIC ARGUMENT. This sort of argument is sometimes treated as a variation of the epistemic argument, since the example Kripke uses is the same Gödel/Schmidt scenario in pp. 83-4. For the purposes of illustration it is easier to operate with names for obscure characters. Suppose all we know about Thales is that he was the Greek philosopher who believed that all is water. So the description *D* for the name 'Thales' is 'the Greek philosopher who believed that all is water'. But suppose now that Thales did not in fact believe that all was water. He believed that all was air. There was another Greek philosopher, Thales' lame brother in fact, who believed that all was water. According to the cluster view, in uttering, for example, the statement:

Thales was Greek (5-6)

the speaker must be referring to lame brother. However, more plausibly, we should say that in using the name 'Thales' we continue referring to the healthy brother. We can exclaim:

Ah, now we know that *Thales* did not believe that everything was water; it was *his brother* who did! (5-7)

An important thing to notice here is that the cluster-description theorist may relax his view slightly and hold that the meaning of a proper name is not spelled out by the description *D* (or: a proper name is not an abbreviation of *D*). But the description *fixes the reference* of the name. Thus he can insist on these two claims:

- (i) There is a complex description *D* such that the name 'NN' refers to the object *x* just in case *x* satisfies *D*;
- (ii) The proposition 'If NN exists, then NN is *D*' is knowable by virtue of understanding the name 'NN'.

In other words, the reference of a name is fixed by a description even though we remain neutral on the issue of the meaning of proper names.

The Thales scenario (analogously the Gödel/Schmidt scenario) serves to undermine this view. The name 'Thales' keeps its previous reference on our lips even after we realise that the description *D* designates the Thales' brother. We could say that the Greek philosopher who believed that everything was water was lame, but we would not conclude that Thales was lame.

Likewise, it is a matter of historical, not *semantic*, enquiry to determine that Thales was the Greek philosopher who believed that all was water. These observations, according to Kripke, should generalise to other cases as well.