Handout 9

Nominal descriptivism II: Bach

THE CIRCULARITY ARGUMENT. Kripke's objection to nominal descriptivism is that it does not give us any information what the name refers to. If you associated a description 'the founder of the USSR' with the name 'Lenin', then you could say:

> The name 'Lenin' refers to the founder of the USSR. (9-1)

But if, as nominal descriptivism suggests, you associate 'Lenin' with 'the bearer of the name "Lenin"', then you move in circles:

> The name 'Lenin' refers to whoever bears the name 'Lenin'. (9-2)

Well, strictly speaking, this is not a circle. After all, there is some minimal information about Lenin provided by (9-2)—that Lenin bears the name 'Lenin'.

But a Kripkean might object at this point that nominal descriptivism does not show us a way the name refers to the individual bearing the name. If the question is, 'Who *does* bear the name "Lenin"?', the answer is 'Well, Lenin.' Such an answer does not help us identify the individual. This is all the more so, since the user of the name 'Lenin' who asks the question is presumably aware of the answer, a fact that makes that answer trivial. We contrast this situation to the situation with the claim (9-1) which does purport to allow us identifying the bearer in the multitude of other individuals. A Frege-Russell view exemplified by (9-1) can therefore be compared favourably with nominal descriptivism.

As I see it, Bach offers a two-pronged response. In the first place, the fact of triviality can be used to support the view that the meaning of the name is given by the nominal description. Every competent user, i.e. a minimally competent one, possesses this information.

Thus conceived, nominal descriptivism is not a theory of reference. It is just a theory of semantic meaning. At this point it is also a Fregean who should join Kripke in complaining against nominal descriptivism. For if the meaning of a name does not help us fix the reference, then sense gets divorced from reference. That is, proper names do not have Fregean senses.

Now Bach admits that. The fact of shared names serves as evidence (I think) that names indeed do not have Fregean senses. How then is the reference of a name fixed? It can be fixed in any number of ways, including by causal chains (as well as by initial baptism). And precisely because the meaning of the name is equated with the nominal description, people can use the name across the causal chain. While the semantic meaning of a name does not, by itself, fix the reference, it still does play a role in fixing the reference of that name.

Example 1. After the initial baptism, the name 'Lenin' is transmitted down the chain. So we could imagine that Brezhnev received the name 'Lenin' from Stalin. This is convenient, since we also assume that, not having been acquainted with Lenin, Brezhnev could only fix the reference of 'Lenin' by receiving it from someone higher up in the causal chain. What, however, allowed Stalin to transmit the name, and what allowed Brezhnev to receive the name, is the understanding that 'Lenin' is equivalent to 'the bearer of "Lenin"'. This is how Brezhnev interprets the sentence 'Lenin is *F*' he hears from his informant (Stalin). Thus one question is, 'What does the expression "Lenin" mean?', to which the answer is, 'The name "Lenin" means "the bearer of 'Lenin'"'. The next question is, '*Who* is the bearer of the name "Lenin"?' For Brezhnev, the answer is, 'Whoever Stalin refers to by using the name "Lenin".' This locution is essential in the situations when the user has no uniquely identifying information about the object, or when the name is shared by more than one bearer.

As Bach makes clear later, reference determination is not a matter of semantics. It in principle cannot be gleaned from the meaning of a name. It is a matter of the speaker's intention to refer, hence a matter of pragmatics. But in order to understand the intention of a speaker—e.g., of an informant in a causal chain—one has to understand the language that speaker is using. Nominal descriptivism explains how that is possible. Notice also the non-literal uses of the name (the example of 'Elvis'). What makes such uses non-literal is precisely the fact that the name '*N*' is not equivalent to 'the bearer of "*N*"'.

Names translated? Is nominal descriptivism adequate in the light of different renderings of names in different languages? As Kripke already noted, the Biblical Moses (if he existed) did not bear the name 'Moses' (but rather 'Moshe'). So the sentence 'Moses stuttered' cannot be equivalent to 'The bearer of "Moses" stuttered.' One sentence may be true at the same time when the other is false. The question is whether Moses (*that man*) bore the name 'Moses'. Not only does it sound strange to say that, but also, by the same logic, Moses would then bear any number of names, depending on how the name 'Moshe' is rendered in different languages (e.g., 'Musa' in Turkish etc.). So far as a nominal description describes the relevant individual, it seems that, at least in some cases, it describes him wrongly. It certainly misleads in fixing the reference of the name (contrary to our conclusion above).

Elsewhere in the book Bach replies that names do not get translated from one language to another, and that, therefore, 'Moses', 'Moshe', and 'Musa' are all the same name, only represented differently. I have never been convinced by this argument. It does not seem plausible at all to say that Saul Kripke and Paul McCartney have the same first name. Kripke does not bear the name 'Paul', and McCartney does not bear the name 'Saul'. That much is clear, unless there is an additional explanation. In other cases, there may be a different intuition, as in 'Joseph Stalin' and 'Joseph Goebbels'. But this clash of intuitions, by itself, tells against nominal descriptivism.

'Paul' and 'Saul' distinguished. There is, I think, another possible reply (I fear also not too convincing). In the case of the Biblical Moses, the use of the name 'Moses' is *meant* to capture the use of the name 'Moshe', or at least was meant so at some earlier point. Someone who asserts, in English, that 'Moses' in 'Moses stuttered' has no reference to the earlier Hebrew use has not mastered the use of 'Moses'. He should be aware that the name, in this instance, is not internal to the narrow English use, and he should be aware that it is an analogue of a foreign name.

Clearly this situation is different from 'Paul McCartney', where the use has lost any reference, or can reasonably be assumed to have lost it, to the original Hebrew use. But it is similar to the case of 'St Paul'. There the use of the name was meant to capture the continuity with the use of the name 'Saul'. Thus someone who is not aware of that has not, on the present view, mastered the use of 'Paul' in naming the apostle. So the apostle's name is one which is differently transcribed as 'Saul', 'Paul', 'Pavel', 'Paolo', 'Pavlo' etc. Stalin and Goebbels also bear the same name, according to this argument, because in both instances the names were designed to capture continuity with the Biblical origin (I am sure about Stalin, though not sure about Goebbels).

Example 2. Suppose an English Protestant intends to name his son in honour of the prophet Isaiah. The prophet's name in Hebrew should properly be transcribed as 'Yeshayahu'. But the father does not wish the son to bear a distinctively non-English name, with its foreign phonemes. So he names the son 'Isaiah'. Then the son and the prophet share the same name. Suppose, on the other hand, an English atheist wants to name his son 'Isaiah' merely because he likes the sound of the name. Then this second boy and the prophet have different names. (Or so it seems to me.)

YSB