

Kripke on Semantics

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A Note on Method

- Kripke's early work on semantics was in the formal semantics of modal logic.
- In *Naming and Necessity*, he treats semantics of natural language.
- He relies very heavily on intuitive considerations.
 - “Some philosophers think that something's having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favor of it. I think it is very heavy evidence in favor of anything, myself. I really don't know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking” (42).
- And he claims to think poorly of philosophical theories.
 - “The only defect I think [a certain theory] has is probably common to all philosophical theories. It's wrong. You may suspect me of proposing another theory in its place; but I hope not, because I'm sure it's wrong too if it is a theory” (64).

The Significance of Names

- A key question in semantics has to do with the significance of names.
- We will be considering here proper names in natural language, such as those of:
 - Persons: ‘Sir Walter Scott,’
 - Cities: ‘London,’
 - Countries: ‘England.’
- Mill held that names have no “connotation,” but only reference.
- Frege and Russell claimed, on the contrary, that names have meaning as well as reference.
- The Frege-Russell view became predominant over the Millian view.

Mill's View

- The city of Dartmouth may have been so named because it lies at the mouth of the Dart River.
- Suppose that 'Dartmouth' connotes or means, 'City at the mouth of the Dart River.'
- Suppose further that the course of the Dart River has changed, and the city is no longer at its mouth.
- No one would think of ceasing to apply the name 'Dartmouth' in the customary way.
- A proper name only shows what we are talking about, without saying anything about it.
- "Proper names are attached to the objects themselves, and are not dependent on the continuance of any attribute of the object" (Mill, *A System of Logic*, Book I, Chapter II, *Of Names*).
- Kripke: "Someone who said that Dartmouth does not lie at the Dart's mouth would not contradict himself" (26).

The Frege-Russell View

- For Frege and Russell, a proper name which is used correctly is merely a disguised or abbreviated definite description.
 - Frege specifically claimed that a description is the sense or meaning of the name.
- This view is supposed to remedy a deficiency in Mill's view.
- It explains how we can use names to refer things (or "determine the reference of things") with which we are not personally acquainted.
- We can do this only based on our knowledge of the things in question.
- And this knowledge is what is expressed by the definite description.
 - To whom are you referring when you use the word 'Napoleon?'
 - I am referring to the emperor of the French in the early part of the nineteenth century, who was eventually defeated at Waterloo.

Subsidiary Arguments for the Frege-Russell View

- Frege noted that we can account for the informativeness of identity statements involving two proper names if their meaning is a description.
 - Hesperus is Phosphorus.
 - The star we saw in the evening is the star we saw in the morning.
- We can also inquire whether the apparent referent of a proper name actually exists or existed.
 - Did Aristotle exist?
 - Was there exactly one Greek philosopher who wrote certain philosophical works?
- Kripke thinks the Frege-Russell view is false, but he will not try to answer all the arguments in favor of their view.

A Problem with the Frege-Russell View

- A problem for the Frege-Russell view is that it seems that there is no single description which is the unique meaning of a proper name.
 - The meaning of ‘Aristotle’ is ‘Plato’s disciple and the teacher of Alexander the Great.’
 - The meaning of ‘Aristotle’ is ‘The Stagirite teacher of Alexander the Great.’
- Frege is willing to tolerate these fluxuations in ordinary language, but not in a perfect language.
- A further difficulty is that if there is a unique meaning expressed by a description, some sentences would be analytic.
 - Aristotle taught Alexander the Great.
 - The Stagirite teacher of Alexander the Great taught Alexander the Great.

Cluster Theories

- The most common solution is to allow that no single description is semantically associated with a name, but rather that a cluster of descriptions is.
- The cluster of descriptions could fulfill one of two semantical roles, either:
 - Giving the meaning of the name, or
 - Determining the referent of the name.
- One could, like Ziff, allow that the cluster of descriptions determine what names refer to without allowing that names have meaning.

Clusters as Determining Reference

- The cluster theory taken merely as an account of determining reference is relatively weak.
- It does not explain the phenomena that the Frege-Russell theory was designed to handle.
 - ‘Moses does not exist’ cannot be analyzed into ‘There is no unique man who did such and such.’
 - Different descriptions of the cluster will fill out the ‘such and such’ in different ways.
- A special argument, independent of the general theory of the meaning of names, would be required to provide the needed analyses.
- Kripke does not pursue this possibility, since he rejects the view that there is any such analysis of the negative existential.

The *A Priori* and the Necessary

- Philosophers often talk as if the following descriptions of the truth of sentences mean the same thing:
 - *A priori*,
 - Analytic,
 - Necessary,
- Kripke does not use the terms ‘*a priori*’ and ‘necessary’ interchangeably.
- He will argue in both directions:
 - Some truths are contingent (hence not necessary) yet are known *a priori*,
 - Some necessary truths are known *a posteriori* (hence not *a priori*).

The *A Priori*

- The traditional Kantian account of an *a priori* truth is as one which can be known independently of experience.
- By whom can an *a priori* truth be so known:
 - God?
 - Martians?
 - People with minds like ours?
- To avoid having to answer this question, we can relativize the notion of the *a priori* to a person:

- A particular knower knows something *a priori*,
- A particular believer believes something is true based on *a priori* evidence.
- It is possible that the same truth that is knowable *a priori* is knowable through experience.
 - That a certain number is prime is learned from the output of a computer.

Necessity

- The concept of necessity is sometimes used in different ways:
 - Epistemologically (and thus as equivalent to *a priori*),
 - Physically,
 - Metaphysically.
- A sentence is metaphysically necessary when it is not possible that the world should have been different with respect to what it says.
- A sentence that is metaphysically necessary may not be epistemologically necessary.
 - Goldbach’s conjecture (an even number greater than 2 must be the sum of two prime numbers).
- If it is true, the world could not have been other than to make it true.
- But we may not know whether it is true or false, so it is not epistemologically necessary (or known *a priori*).

Attempts to Connect Necessity With the *A Priori*

- The example of Goldbach’s conjecture shows that ‘necessary’ and ‘*a priori*’ “as applied to statements, are *not* obvious synonyms” (38).
- An argument is needed to connect the two.
- Two main reasons for their equivalence have been given:
 - A necessary sentence can be known to be true simply by running through all the possible worlds in our heads.
 - What is known *a priori* is known without looking at the world, and so must not depend on any contingent feature of the actual world.
- Neither reason is trivial.
- So the connection of necessity with the *a priori* is not trivial.

Necessity *De Dicto* and *De Re*

- Suppose we allow the necessity of sentences (necessity *de dicto*).
- It can still be held that there are no necessary properties of things (necessity *de re*).
- It is argued that a property of a thing can be thought of as necessary or as contingent depending on the way it is described.
 - Necessarily, 9 is an odd number.
 - Possibly the number of the planets is not an odd number.
 - Necessarily, the man who won the US presidential election in 1968 won the US presidential election in 1968.
 - Possibly, Nixon did not win the US presidential election in 1968.
- So at best, a property holds at all possible worlds of a thing *as described in a specific way*.

The Intuitiveness of Allowing Essential Properties

- It is thought that allowing necessary (“essential”) properties of an individual as such (not under a description) is unintuitive and something only a bad philosopher would think of doing.
- But the reverse is true: it is intuitive to think that there may be necessary properties (though it could turn out that there are none).
- Suppose some ordinary person points at Nixon and says, “This man might not have won the election.”
- The intuitively clear meaning is that *this man*, the man who actually won the election, is the actual winner, but under different circumstances, someone else would have been the winner, or no one would have won at all.
- So the necessary or contingent properties are properties of *this man*, who is just named by ‘Nixon’ or described as “the winner of the election.”

“Identity Across Possible Worlds”

- Philosophers who think the accidental/essential properties distinction is unintuitive may be motivated by a view about “identity across possible worlds.
- On this view, possible worlds are characterized by purely qualitative descriptions.
 - We must not say that a world contains Nixon, but rather:

- It contains a man with a dog named Checkers, who looks like a comedian doing a certain impression, and loses the 1968 presidential election.
- To tell whether Nixon has accidental properties, we must be able to tell whether someone in such a world who lacks some properties of the real Nixon is really Nixon.
- It looks like we cannot in general do that, and so we cannot make sense of “accidental” properties.

How to Think About Possible Worlds

- Kripke suggests that we return to the intuitive way in which possible worlds are understood.
- They are not *discovered*, as if with a telescope.
- Rather, they are *stipulated* by giving a description of them.
- The description can make reference to individuals such as myself or Nixon.
- So when we ask whether Nixon might have lost the election, we consider counterfactual worlds containing Nixon himself, and ask whether in any such world he has lost the election.
- “We can point to the *man*, and ask what might have happened to *him*, had events been different” (46).

Essential Properties and Knowledge

- We might ask whether Nixon might not have been a human being, given that he is one.
- If so, then being a human being is not an essential property of Nixon.
- Whether being human is essential to Nixon the human being is not a question about what we know.
 - “It is a question about, even though such and such things are the case, what might have been the case otherwise” (47).
- A similar case involves whether this table, which is composed of molecules, might not have been so composed.
- This question is distinct from the question of whether and how we know that it is composed of molecules.

Rigid Designators

- We will assume that we can make sense of the notion of “identity across possible worlds.”
- Then we can give a quasi-technical definition of two kinds of designators:
 - Rigid: designating the same object in every possible world,
 - Non-Rigid, or Accidental: not designating the same object in every possible world.
- A designator is strongly rigid when what it designates exists in all possible worlds.
- We think of a property as being essential when it holds of an object at every world at which it exists.

Names as Rigid Designators

- One of Kripke’s main intuitive theses is that names are rigid designators.
 - ‘Nixon’ (in our world) designates Nixon, and Nixon is the same object in every world in which he exists.
 - So ‘Nixon’ (as used in our world) designates the same object in all applicable possible worlds.
- A description such as ‘the President of the U.S. in 1970’ is a non-rigid designator.
 - Humphrey might have been the President in 1970.
- To demand that we have qualitative criteria of trans-world identity in order to make sense of rigid designation is a reversal of our intuitive understanding of the semantics of names.

Things and Properties

- The felt need to demand “trans-world identity” in terms of identification by qualities is based on a false dilemma about the relation of things and properties.
 - Either a thing is nothing but a “bundle” of properties, or
 - A thing is a “bare particular” which “stands behind” its properties.
- A better view is that a thing *has* all its properties.
 - “This table is wooden, brown, in the room, etc.” (52).
- So we can talk about what this table might have been by considering worlds containing this table and asking what properties it has there.

Determining Reference

- Suppose that the length “one meter” is the length of a certain bar (the “meter bar”) in Paris.
- Wittgenstein must have been wrong in denying that the meter bar is one meter in length.
- It might be asked whether being one meter in length is essential to the meter bar, i.e., whether the meter bar is one meter in length in all possible worlds.
- Some say that it must be one meter long, because its length defines the meaning of ‘one meter.’
- But in fact, the length of the bar only determines the reference of ‘one meter.’
- Had the bar been heated, it would have been more than one meter in length.
- Here, ‘one meter’ rigidly designates a certain length that the meter-bar might or might not have had.

Contingent *A Priori* Truths

- If someone knows that the meter-bar *S* has been used to fix the reference of ‘one meter,’ then he knows *a priori* that *S* is one meter long in the actual world.
- We have seen that *S* might have had a different length than its actual length, which fixed the reference of ‘one meter.’
- Thus, the statement ‘*S* is one meter long’ is contingent.
- It follows that not all statements known *a priori* are necessary, as Kant and others had held.
- The reason that the *a priori* and the necessary can come apart is that the former is an epistemological notion, while the latter is metaphysical.

Definitions

- The important lesson from the meter-bar example is that definitions can be given by fixing reference.
- This means that not all definitions give a synonym.
- The distinction applies to names as well.
- If ‘Aristotle’ is supposed to be synonymous with ‘the greatest man who studied with Plato,’ then it is not a rigid designator.
 - In some other possible world, another man is the greatest who studied with Plato.

- But if ‘the greatest man who studied with Plato’ only fixes the reference of ‘Aristotle,’ we can consistently say that Aristotle might not have studied with Plato.
- Kripke endorses the general claim that names are always rigid designators.

Negative Existentials

- On the Frege-Russell analysis of names as descriptions, ‘Moses did not exist’ is analyzed as:
 - The man who did such and such (say led the Israelites out of Egypt) did not exist, which for Russell meant,
 - It is not the case that there is a unique man who led the Israelites out of Egypt.
- But intuitively, it seems that Moses might have done things which would have precluded his leading the Israelites out of Egypt.
- This intuition can be accommodated if ‘the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt’ merely fixes the reference of ‘Moses.’

How Reference Gets Fixed

- In the rest of Lecture I and through most of Lecture II, Kripke criticizes a detailed formulation of the cluster theory of the meaning or reference of names.
- As a theory of meaning, the cluster theory has the unintuitive consequences already noted.
- The main problem with the cluster theory as a theory of reference is that it gives a mostly wrong picture of how reference is fixed.
- It is based on the idea that the reference of a name is fixed in isolation from the linguistic community, by a mere act of attaching a description to it.
 - “By ‘Gödel’ I shall mean the man, whoever he is, who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic” (91).
- In most cases, reference is fixed through a social process, beginning with an initial “baptism” and passing the reference on in a chain of communication (96).

Identity Statements

- The balance of Lecture II contains a treatment of identity statements.
- It is generally agreed that identity statements involving descriptions are contingent:
 - ‘The man who invented bifocals was the first Postmaster General of the United States.’

- If this statement is true (as it presumably is about Benjamin Franklin), then it is contingently true.
- Given that names are rigid designators, a statement of identity whose terms are names are necessarily true if true at all.
 - ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus.’
 - The referent of ‘Hesperus’ is the same at all worlds, as is the referent of ‘Phosphorus,’ so if they refer to the same thing at one world, they refer to the same thing at all worlds.
- In some cases the necessary truth of identity statements is known only *a posteriori*.

Essential Properties

- At the beginning of Lecture III, Kripke gives some examples of what he is convinced are essential properties.
- A property is essential when its bearer could not have failed to have it.
 - Given that Queen Elizabeth II was born of two parents, she could not have come from parents other than those very two persons.
 - Given that this table was made from a certain hunk of wood, it could not have come from another hunk of wood, or have come from something else, such as ice.
- We might grant that there could be something exactly resembling these objects in just the places they occupy, but these objects would be something other than Elizabeth or this table.

Theoretical Identities

- Some statements of identity involving theoretical terms are necessary, though known *a posteriori*.
 - Gold is the element with atomic number 79,
 - Heat is molecular motion.
- Scientific discoveries about what a kind of thing *is* are *a posteriori* discoveries of necessary truths.
 - Assume that the reference of ‘heat’ has been fixed in some way.
 - Then it is learned through scientific investigation that this kind of thing has is molecular motion of some kind.
 - In all possible worlds, what we call ‘heat’ is that kind of molecular motion: it is what heat *is*.

- We may think that the identity is contingent because the property that fixes the reference (a feeling of heat) is only contingently related to the kind (heat).
- In general the semantical behavior of natural kinds terms parallels that of proper names: their rigid designation makes identity statements necessary.

Mind-Body Identity

- Some philosophers have made identity claims relative to minds and bodies:
 - A person is identical with his body,
 - A particular sensation is identical to a brain state,
 - A certain type of mental state is identical to a certain type of brain state (pain = stimulation of C-fibers).
- Taking mental states and brain states to be natural kinds, the identity, if true, is necessarily true, given the results above.
- So if the identity theory espoused by materialism is a scientific theoretical identification, the identities involved are necessary.

Against Materialism

- It seems that the identity between types of mental states and types of brain states is contingent.
 - A brain state might exist without the corresponding mental state,
 - A mental state might exist without the corresponding brain state.
- If so, then the materialistic identity theory is not a scientific theoretical identification.
- The contingency here is not the kind of contingency found in scientific theoretical identities.
 - What fixes the reference may be a contingent property, such as a feeling of heat.
- In the mind-body case, there is no such contingent property which fixes the reference of 'pain.'
- Pain is what it appears to be: a feeling of pain is pain.