

NOTE ON NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS

Andrew Richmond

I'm going to argue that Kripke's critique of descriptivism refutes only theories that claim the referent of a word is determined by a description available to the *individual* word-user. I'll then draw some conclusions about his project in general.

Kripke's anti-descriptivist arguments are mostly just intuitions that reference succeeds in cases where the relevant descriptions fail. Clearly I'm referring to Gödel when I use "Gödel", even if any description I could give of Gödel fails to determine him as referent. But descriptivism needn't be so individualistic. When I talk about historical figures, not to mention the entities of specialized areas of inquiry (electrons, souls, or what-have-you), I don't take reference to be fully in my hands. And even in more mundane cases, for the most part I feel the same way. If I tell you, "I saw your friend Janet — the one with the nose ring", and you reply, "Janet doesn't have a nose ring", I won't insist, "Well I saw Janet, because I use 'Janet' to refer to your friend with the nose ring". You get to correct me because, despite my intentions, the word I used refers to someone other than I thought it did.

So a more plausible descriptivist account is that the reference of any word is determined by the (suitably weighted) descriptions determined by a linguistic community, or by a group of experts within that community, or both. Let's try out Kripke's intuitions against this version of descriptivism.

With theoretical entities it seems clear. If it turns out there is no entity with a negative charge which shows up at various places around the nuclei of certain elements (one showing up with each Hydrogen atom, two with Magnesium, etc.), then I think we're going to admit that electrons don't exist. My own beliefs about them, or folk beliefs, might all be false while reference succeeds (I might think they're little blue balls like in the textbooks), but if the expert description of them doesn't pick anything out — say the negative charge is caused by some feature of neutrons, the energy atoms carry by some feature of protons, electrical current by little men running along the wires, etc. — then if

(by chance) there is some entity floating around nuclei, with none of the other features the experts took electrons to have, surely we'll admit that electrons don't exist.¹

With non-theoretical entities the case isn't so clear, but suppose that Aristotle is found not to be Plato's student, or the Stagirian teacher of Alexander, etc., etc., and that each item of the Aristotelian corpus is found to have been written by a separate person, all writing under one name.² Now that the experts' description is flouted — not just yours or mine — what do we make of the name “Aristotle”? Does it still refer to someone living in the area at the time? Let that someone have Aristotle's ‘essential’ properties (whatever that means), and strip him of the rest. Then when Aristotle scholars talk and write using “Aristotle”, are they really referring to some guy who didn't write anything Aristotle did? If he wrote many or at least *some* of the works attributed to him (i.e. if he had some cluster of the properties given by the description), we might think so. Then we would say things like, “Actually, Aristotle didn't write the *Metaphysics*”. But if this person wrote none of them — he was actually a baker in Athens with no interest in philosophy, or a craftsman's son who died too young to have done anything in the expert description — we would say things like, “Actually, that person wasn't Aristotle after all, *this other person was*”, even if the original person had Aristotle's ‘essential’ properties.^{3,4}

Likewise for non-expert communal descriptions. *My* few beliefs about Albert Einstein aren't enough to determine a referent for his name, but the description of the whole community is, and if that description picks out (say) a German patent clerk, and the person I *thought* the description picked out never read a physics book or wrote an anti-war manifesto or ... in his life, and especially if we've been using “Einstein” in our

¹ Maybe Kripke would say we've taken away their ‘essential’ properties. I have no idea what this could mean, so I'll mostly ignore it.

² The early days of the Nicolas Bourbaki group may be an actual example of this.

³ What are ‘essential’ properties? Age? Species? Sex? If essential properties exist, they seem to be the least interesting properties, and the ones that a historian would be least interested in, and least likely to care about in fixing a referent for his research.

⁴ This makes it necessary that Aristotle had some cluster of a set of properties. But considering how we, and especially how experts use his name, I don't think that's a hard bullet to bite. It still isn't necessary that *that guy* (taken to refer rigidly) was a philosopher, but on our use of “Aristotle” it's necessary that Aristotle had at least some of the properties historians and philosophers are concerned with.

In general, names whose meaning is their social description will involve necessary properties, and *a priori* knowable ones, but *a priori* knowable only to people who grasp the full meaning of the word (very few, when the description draws from a wide range of people). And what's necessary and *a priori* won't be anything very interesting, just that Aristotle had some cluster (or weighted subset) of the properties A, B, C, It's still an empirical discovery and a contingent fact that he had (say) the property A.

discussions about physics and pacifism and . . . , then I think it's clear that when we talk about Einstein we're talking about the *actual* author and physicist. Most of this is ignored by Kripke because he dismisses descriptivism on the grounds that *one person's* beliefs about a thing can be false while their words still refer to it. In the rare passage where he considers more complete descriptions he either leans on 'essential' properties that the referent must have, or insists that no individual person knows that whole description anyways (page 62 has examples of both). In the case where the person alleged to be Aristotle had none (or almost none) of the properties the experts think he did and none (or almost none) of the properties relevant to their research (or the properties the community believes he has and those relevant to the discourse of the community) it seems to me that this person isn't Aristotle.⁵

In some respects these thoughts differ very little from Kripke's causal theory. The referent of a word is determined by facts external to the speaker, and those facts have to do with a community's use of the word. But we can look to the descriptions determined at that level, rather than causal origins. This is helpful on one front: we aren't hamstrung by typical complaints about misunderstandings, as when two ships pass on the Atlantic and one captain shouts to the other "Your *flag* is down!". The second captain hasn't heard the word "flag" but he looks up, sees his foremast is down, and rushes to fix it. He takes it that "flag" referred to the foremast, and since his own community didn't have a unique word for the foremast, the name spreads around his community. Now is his community globally mistaken about the meaning of sentences like "Raise the flag"? Of course not — by "flag" they mean the foremast. The social-descriptive theory handles that sort of case much better than the causal theory, which would have it that "flag" still refers, for this new community, to flags.

Likely (and maybe this is why Kripke didn't want to offer a theory) neither theory is fully correct. Language is a tool, and it's used by a speaker (mostly) to cause changes in the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviour of a hearer. To do this successfully it must communicate both (a) the references the speaker makes — so you know what she's talking about — and (b) the descriptions associated with those references. (b) both

⁵ It seems that weighing the relevance of properties to experts' research and communal discourse is a good way to set the weights of those properties in determining a reference. But I won't develop this any further.

facilitates reference and allows you understand the speaker in a more fine-grained way. “You should take a picture of Venus” doesn’t do much work if the hearer knows what the referent of “Venus” is but doesn’t know some of the properties associated with the name, particularly properties given by descriptions like, “The star in such-and-such a location at such-and-such a time”.

In short, I’m not sure why we would think there is a single or primary way the reference of words is determined, rather than a cluster of methods, determined by our capacities — to point, describe, baptise, imitate — and our goals that require the communication of both reference and sense (to varying degrees). Even for a single word, different contexts call for different methods of determining reference. Kripke showed us what happens with one use of “Gödel”, but what about when I’m reading the Incompleteness Theorem and I say, “Oh, so Gödel thinks he can prove line 45 *without* lemma 6”. Or I’m teaching the theorem and I say this. Am I saying something false to my students? Of course not. In this case it looks like “Gödel” refers to whomever authored the proof, even if that person is Schmidt. Even in the Aristotle case there can be different analyses. A community of philosophers wouldn’t take “Aristotle” to refer to someone that didn’t write any of the Aristotelian works — even if he did, say, teach Alexander. But historians who study Alexander probably wouldn’t take reference to be disturbed.

Maybe this puts too much emphasis on an individual’s intentions, and whether he himself is trying to describe, baptise, etc. But I think this can all be described in terms of community and context rather than any speaker’s intentions; the kind of thing I’m doing and the people I’m doing it with make it the case that (say) “Gödel” refers via description or rigidly — it’s rarely transparent to the speaker which is the case. The best we can hope is that, for any word in any context, we can tell some story about reference that explains how the word causes (or fails to cause) the relevant thoughts, attitudes, and behavior in its hearers, drawing on the tools and capacities we use to cause thoughts (etc.) in others. This would take a lot more detail than I’ve given, but to characterize linguistic reference any further (e.g. claiming that names are non-descriptive) seems to artificially narrow the phenomenon.