Kripke's case against descriptivism

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1   Circular vs. non-circular descriptivisms

Weve already seen two distinctions Kripke makes between different versions of descriptivism:

- The distinction between descriptivist views which let a single description do the work, and those which rely on a cluster of descriptions

- The distinction between views according to which a description gives the meaning of a name, and those according to which it merely fixes the reference of the name

Here Kripke introduces a third distinction: between circular and non-circular descriptivist views. This distinction is not like the others; it is less a distinction between varieties of descriptivism than a constraint on descriptivist views.

What exactly is this constraint? Suppose we identified the meaning of the name 'Aristotle' with the meaning of the description 'the person called 'Aristotle'' or 'the referent of 'Aristotle.'' These would be examples of descriptivist views which fail to meet the non-circularity condition, since to determine what object satisfies the description, we must first know which object is the referent of the name in question.

What would be wrong with using descriptions of this sort to give the meaning of, or fix the referent of, 'Aristotle'?

2   The modal argument (48-49, 71-77)

In Lecture I, Kripke introduced the notion of rigid designation. There we saw that we could give the following test for the rigidity of a term:

Kripke thinks that ordinary proper names are rigid designators, whereas ordinary definite descriptions are not. (There are some descriptions which are plausibly rigid designators e.g., 'the sum of 3 and 4' but these are the exception.)

But, Kripke argues, if one expression is a rigid designator, and another is not, the two cannot mean the same thing. One way to see this: consider sentences of the form

> Necessarily, n is n

and

> Necessarily, n is the F

These will differ in truth-value if 'n' is a rigid designator and 'the F' is not. But it seems plausible that we can never transform a truth into a falsehood by replacing one synonym with another.

This is the modal argument:

1. Ordinary proper names are rigid designators.
2. Ordinary descriptions are not rigid designators.
3. If e is a rigid designator, and e* is not a rigid designator, then e and e* cannot mean the same thing.

C. Ordinary names do not mean the same thing as any (ordinary) (1,2,3) definite description.

Why this argument counts against the view that the meanings of names are given by their associated descriptions, but not against the view that the reference of a name is fixed by its associated descriptions.

3   The semantic argument (78-85)

Kripke has two other arguments against the descriptive theory. The first of these is surprisingly simple, and is sometimes called the 'semantic argument.' Consider a name you are competent with using, and count as understanding, like 'Cicero' or 'Richard Feynman.' What descriptions do you associate with the name? If you are like most people, you don't know of any uniquely identifying non-circular description of people like this. (If you do know such a description, we can come up with another case for you where you can't.)

What if we tried 'the famous 20th century physicist'? How about 'the famous 20th century physicist named 'Feynman'?

But in these cases do we want to say that the name has no reference for you, just because the descriptions you associate with the name do not pick anyone out uniquely? Surely not.

There's a further twist on the argument. Sometimes speakers not only do not have uniquely satisfied descriptions to associate with a name, but also associate the wrong descriptions with the name: descriptions that are in fact not even true of the referent. The example Kripke gives is 'Albert Einstein.' Evidently lots of people think that Einstein was the inventor of the atomic bomb, and this is the description they most associate with the name. But of course just because they associate this description with the name, they do not use the name to refer to Oppenheimer; after all, when they say 'Einstein invented the bomb', what they say is false, not true! Another example: Peano and Dedekind.

These examples are all ways of making the same point: the descriptions speakers associate with names often do not even have the same reference as the name, and hence can't either give the meaning of the name, or fix its reference.

4 The epistemic argument (86-87)

There is another powerful argument against the description theory, on which Kripke touches only briefly. Consider a sentence of the form,

> If the F exists, then the F is F.

This appears to be knowable a priori. If so, then it seems that every sentence of the following form is true:

> It is knowable a priori that if the F exists, then the F is F.

But now suppose that n is some name whose meaning, according to the description theory of names, is given by the description 'the F.' Then our principle of replacing synonyms without change of truth-value leads us to the claim that the following sentence is true:

> It is knowable a priori that if the F exists, then n is F.

But for many name/description pairs which might be employed in a descriptivist theory, this will not hold. Compare:

3

It is knowable a priori that if the greatest philosopher of antiquity exists, then the greatest philosopher of antiquity is the greatest philosopher of antiquity.

It is knowable a priori that if the greatest philosopher of antiquity exists, then Aristotle is the greatest philosopher of antiquity.

This argument also works against the view that the reference of a name is fixed by its associated description, if we accept Kripke's claims about a priori knowledge of reference-fixers which we discussed in connection with the example of the standard meter.