

Kripke's Cartesian argument against materialism

Jeff Speaks
PHIL 30304

September 27, 2018

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Kripke next turns his attention to the mind-body problem. The discussion here brings to bear many of the results from earlier in the book, including rigid designation, the necessity of identity, the possibility of necessary a posteriori truths, and explanations of the illusion that certain a posteriori necessary truths are contingent. Kripke uses these to shed light on an argument we've already encountered: Descartes' argument for dualism.

1 Descartes' argument and Kripke's variation

We saw that Descartes' argument can be represented as follows:

1. If I can clearly and distinctly conceive of such and such being the case, God could make such and such the case.
 2. If God could make such and such the case, then such and such is possible.
 3. If I can clearly and distinctly conceive of such and such being the case, then such and such is possible. (1,2)
 4. I can clearly and distinctly conceive of the mind existing without the body.
 5. I can clearly and distinctly conceive of a case where the mind \neq the body. (4)
 6. It is possible that the mind \neq the body. (3,5)
 7. If it is possible that $a \neq b$, then $a \neq b$.
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- C. The mind \neq the body. (6,7)

Kripke omits the reference to what God can bring about; he also does not talk about what we can clearly and distinctly conceive of (though that is implicit in some of his discussions). Kripke considers three identity theories, and presents Cartesian arguments against all three. Here we will focus, not on his argument for substance dualism, but on his argument for property dualism, since that is the case he spends the most time on, and also the topic that we've been focusing on in this class.

Kripke's argument for property dualism may be presented simply as follows:

1. It is possible that pain \neq C-fiber stimulation.
 2. If it is possible that $a \neq b$, then $a \neq b$.
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- C. Pain \neq C-fiber stimulation. (1,2)

The argument is valid; let's look at Kripke's defense of the premises.

2 Smart, and Kripke's defense of the second premise

Before Kripke, the most popular reply to arguments of this sort was to reject the second premise. We've already seen this reply from Smart, who considers the objection (Objection 2) that it is only contingent that sensations are correlated with brain processes. Smart's reply is to concede that this is only contingent, but deny that this shows that sensations are distinct from brain processes. This is to deny premise (2) of the above argument.

We've already seen Kripke's reply, which is to defend the necessity of true identity sentences involving two rigid designators. That is, for rigid designators a and b , Kripke argues that

If $a = b$, then necessarily $a = b$.

And that is equivalent to the second premise of the above argument. One of the main contributions of *Naming and Necessity* is its defense of this premise.

Could the materialist respond by denying that either 'pain' or 'C-fiber firing' is a rigid designator?

3 Kripke's defense of the first premise

Let's suppose that the second premise is true. Why does Kripke accept the first premise?

Here is what he says about the corresponding claim that it is possible that a particular pain sensation be distinct from a particular brain state:

'Let 'A' name a particular pain sensation, and let 'B' name the corresponding brain state ... Prima facie, it would seem that it is at least logically possible

that B should have existed (Jones's brain could have been in exactly that state at the time in question) without Jones feeling any pain at all, and thus without the presence of A.' (146)

Note that in a sense Kripke is considering a scenario opposite of the one Descartes discussed. Whereas Descartes argues for the possibility of minds without bodies, Kripke argues for the possibility of the relevant physical properties without the corresponding mental properties.

Kripke seems to just take it as obvious that it is possible for there to be a case of a subject whose C-fibers are firing but is not in pain. It seems that he takes this as obvious because it is so easy to imagine, or conceive of, such a situation.

At this stage, Kripke thinks that the onus is on the materialist. It certainly seems possible for there to be C-fiber firing without pain — so we need to be given some reason to think that this appearance of possibility is illusory.

4 A materialist reply: mind-body identities are examples of the necessary a posteriori

Interestingly, Kripke's work in *Naming and Necessity* does not just provide a defense of one of the key premises of the Cartesian argument: it also provides new reason to doubt the other premise.

Kripke, after all, has defended the claim that theoretical identities, like the claim

Heat = molecular motion.

are necessary if true, but are also a posteriori. And if a claim is a posteriori — and hence such that experience is required to know that it is true — it seems plausible that its opposite should be conceivable, and hence seem to be possible. If it were not, then it seems that the claim would be knowable a priori. (Consider e.g. the claim that there are no round squares. Its opposite is not conceivable, and this seems to be part of the reason why this claim is knowable a priori.)

This means that we should in general expect the negation of a theoretical identity to seem possible, but not really be possible. But surely, the identity theorist says, the claim

Pain = C-fiber firing.

is a theoretical identity. So, if this is true, we should expect its negation to seem possible, but not really be possible. And that means that even if, as Kripke says, premise (1) of the Cartesian argument seems true, we have good reason to distrust this intuition.

5 Kripke's reply to the reply: why the mind-body case is different

Kripke argues that this response to the Cartesian argument is no good. The reason is that (i) there is a special explanation of why the negation of claims like 'heat = molecular motion' seem possible, and (ii) this explanation does not apply to the case of mind-body identities like 'pain = C-fiber firing.'

Here is what he says:

'Now I do not think it likely that the identity theorist will succeed in such an endeavor. ... What was the strategy used above to handle the apparent contingency of certain cases of the necessary a posteriori? The strategy was to argue that although the statement itself is necessary, someone could, qualitatively speaking, be in the same epistemic situation as the original, and in such cases a qualitatively analogous statement could be false. ...

Now can something be said analogously to explain away the feeling that the identity of pain and the stimulation of C-fibers, if it is a scientific discovery, could have turned out otherwise? I do not see that such an analogy is possible. In the case of the apparent possibility that molecular motion could have existed in the absence of heat, what seemed really possible is that molecular motion should have existed without being felt as heat, that is, it might have existed without producing the sensation S, the sensation of heat. In the appropriate sentient beings is it analogously possible that a stimulation of C-fibers should have existed without being felt as pain? If this is possible, then the stimulation of C-fibers can itself exist without pain, since for it to exist without being felt as pain is for it to exist without there being any pain. Such a situation would be in flat out contradiction with the supposed necessary identity of pain and the corresponding physical state. ...

The trouble is that the notion of an epistemic situation qualitatively identical to one in which the observer had a sensation S simply *is* one in which the observer had that sensation.' (150-153)

Though Kripke focuses on the heat case, it is perhaps easier to see his point if we look at

Gold = the element with atomic number 79.

We have the sense that this could have 'turned out to be false.' What sort of situation do we have in mind when we think this? Kripke thinks that we imagine a situation qualitatively identical to our own — e.g., we find a yellow metal in the ground, use it to make jewelry, etc. But then when we turn to scientific investigation of this thing, it turns out to be a compound rather than an element. Is this really a situation in which gold is not the element with atomic number 79? Kripke says no — it is a situation in which something other than gold plays the roles that gold plays in the actual world.

So when we think we are imagining a world in which gold is not the element with atomic number 79, we are really imagining a qualitatively identical situation in which 'gold'

has a different meaning than it actually has. That is why the fact that the scenario described above, despite being genuinely possible, does not tell against the necessity of the theoretical identity. This is the explanation of why the negation of this necessary truth *seems* possible, but is not.

Now Kripke wants us to think about the case of

Pain = C-fiber firing.

This seems possible because it seems that we can imagine a situation in which there is C-fiber firing but no pain. The identity theorist has to say that, despite the fact that it seems like there is no pain in this situation, there really is. But, Kripke objects, this makes no sense — a situation in which it does not feel like there is some sensation just is one in which there is no such sensation.

This is why he thinks that the onus is still on the materialist: the explanation of the ‘appearance of contingency’ in the case of ‘heat = mean molecular motion’ does not carry over to the mind-body case.

6 A reply to the reply to the reply

What can the materialist say? Here’s a thought. Consider a different sort of example of the necessary a posteriori: a predication of an essential property of something. Let’s assume for the sake of argument that Kripke is right, and that it is essential to me that I was born of my actual parents. Then (setting aside the possibility of my non-existence) the following is necessary:

Jeff Speaks is the child of Shirley and Joseph Speaks.

But this is obviously a posteriori; and so, as we would expect with an a posteriori truth, I can imagine its opposite. But what is happening when I do this? Am I, as Kripke’s remarks might lead us to expect, imagining a qualitatively identical scenario in which ‘Jeff Speaks’ refers to someone other than me? That seems a bit implausible; it seems as though I am imagining *me* being born to different parents. But then we have a case in which, intuitively, the following are all true:

It is necessary that P.

It seems, in some sense, as though ‘it could have turned out that’ P.

The situation we are imagining when it seems as though ‘it could have turned out that’ P is *not* a qualitatively identical possible situation in which the sentence we use to express P is true.

But isn’t this precisely what the materialist wants to say about mind-body identities?

7 What about functionalism?

So far our focus has been on identity theory. But that is not the only option for the materialist; she might also go for functionalism. Does Kripke's argument also make trouble for the functionalist?

Here is why one might think not. The functionalist says that being in pain is just a matter of having some state which plays the pain role. But the description

the state which plays the pain role

is not a rigid designator. It might, for example, designate C-fiber firing in the case of human beings, but something else entirely in other cases. The functionalist can simply agree with Kripke that

Pain = C-fiber firing.

is not necessary, and therefore false. The property of being in pain is not identical to the property of C-fiber firing; the latter is just the property which happens to play the pain role for us. But there is nothing to stop it not playing the pain role in other cases, and so nothing to stop us from being able to imagine those cases.

That looks like good news for functionalism. But unfortunately there is a version of Kripke's argument which does seem to make trouble for functionalism. The problem is just as it seems possible that there is a subject whose C-fiber fires are firing but who feels no pain, it also seems possible that there is a subject in some state which plays the pain role for that subject, but feels no pain. And if this really is possible, then it looks like this implies that

Pain \neq the property of having some state which plays the pain role

which immediately implies that functionalism is false.

Does the functionalist have any better reply to this argument than the identity theorist?