

Some strengths and weaknesses of Kripke's critique of descriptivism

By Tony Walton

Following Frege and Russell, various forms of descriptivism were the orthodoxy among philosophers for much of the 20th century. Not until Kripke was that dominance challenged. Kripke presented a whole new way of understanding how it is that we come to refer to objects. In *Naming and Necessity* his principal targets were Frege, Russell and Quine (Noonan 2013 p.3), and the result was an approach to epistemology and metaphysics which put *de re* necessity firmly back on the philosophical agenda. In this essay I shall argue that despite the considerable strengths of Kripke's views, his critique of descriptivism should not be uncritically accepted. The main claim I will be defending is that there are some descriptions of persons that should be seen as necessary rather than contingent, and that the explanation for this necessity requires recourse to an account of how the meanings of names are determined within linguistic communities. My focus will be principally on the limitations of Kripke's account of the necessity of origin as the only essential property attributable to a human being.

Descriptivism, which has its principal origins in Frege's concept of 'sense' and Russell's theory of descriptions, treats the names of singular objects as shorthand for a description of the properties those objects possess. That is, an account of the properties attaching to a particular object uniquely defines the object. Frege's way of expressing this was to say that sense determines reference.

There is something intuitively commonsensical about descriptivism. For example, the name 'Barack Obama' is meaningful to me because of the descriptive properties I can attach to him- former President, married to Michelle Obama, environmentalist, etc. And in everyday perception it is the description which distinguishes former President Obama from anyone else with the name 'Barack Obama'. As Lycan has put it: 'When asked "Who [or what] do you mean" after one has just used a name, one immediately and instinctively comes up with a description, as an explanation of what one meant' (Lycan 2008 p.36).

If we take the well-worn example of the meaning of the name 'Aristotle' it is clear that there will be some properties which are contingent rather than necessary, but for the descriptivist there are some *core* properties which are necessary to the meaning of the name 'Aristotle'. (See McGinn 2016 p.40). The mole on Aristotle's elbow is clearly contingent (to use McGinn's example), but his prowess as a philosopher could from a descriptivist standpoint be seen to be essential to the meaning of the name 'Aristotle'.

However, if we look beneath the surface of the descriptivist approach we can see some of the snags that Kripke was rightly concerned about. The underlying assumptions of descriptivism are summarised by McGinn (McGinn 2016, pp.40-41). First, for the descriptivist the relationship between 'A' and 'F' in a sentence 'the A is the F' can be established a priori. That is, the meaning of the name 'A' is synonymous with the description 'F', and knowing the meaning of the name 'A' is to know the properties making up the description 'F'. The sentence 'the A is the F' is therefore analytic and knowable a priori. It requires no further empirical investigation to discover the meaning of the sentence.

Second, for descriptivism the sentence 'the A is the F' expresses a necessary truth because 'A' and 'F' are synonymous. In all possible worlds the 'A' is the 'F'.

Kripke's view of descriptivism is explicitly stated: 'I think it's pretty clear that the view of Frege and Russell is false' (Kripke 1981 p.29). Furthermore, he extends this judgement to

include Searle's 'cluster' view of descriptions (Kripke 1981 p.74) which was designed to get round some of the most obvious problems of the Frege/Russell account.¹

Like descriptivism, the Kripkean approach to names also has a commonsense appeal. It is clear, as Kripke points out, that the person Aristotle might never have been a great philosopher. He might have been a slave or a soldier. This is the commonsense modal observation that things might have turned out differently for any one of us. In short, there is a possible world in which we may have had very different lives. However, it is also the case that it is the person we know as 'Aristotle' whose life might have been different. There is an important sense in which the person who lived Aristotle's life and the person named 'Aristotle' who might have lived a different life are one and the same person. For Kripke, therefore, we need to make the anti-Quinean distinction between what a person is essentially and the contingent properties associated with that person. Kripke is right to make this distinction.

However, in order to see why Kripke's argument is problematic we need to see how he arrives at his account of the essential properties of persons. What is it, for example, that means that the name 'Aristotle' rigidly designates the person Aristotle in all possible worlds even if there is some world in which he is a slave rather than a philosopher? Here we need to refer to Kripke's account of essential properties.

Kripke's discussion of essential properties is principally formulated in relation to natural kinds such as gold and water. He argues persuasively that gold *necessarily* has the atomic number 79, and that water is *necessarily* H²O. However, he also develops his argument in 'Naming and Necessity' using the example of Queen Elizabeth II. Could Elizabeth, he asks, have been born of Mr and Mrs Truman and still have been the same person named 'Elizabeth'? His answer is emphatically that she could not have been the same person. 'How could a person originating from different parents, from a totally different sperm and egg, be *this very woman*.....It seems to me that anything coming from a different origin would not be this object' (Kripke 1981 p.113). That is, in respect of human beings as instances of a particular natural kind, it is biological origin that determines what is necessary for the identification of the person in all possible worlds. There is no possible world in which Elizabeth II (or Aristotle) could have had any different natural origin. A different origin would have meant being a different person.

How compelling is Kripke's account, and does it offer a cast iron case against descriptivism?

My argument begins with a point made by Gareth Evans in 'The Varieties of Reference' that language is 'an intrinsically social phenomenon' and 'functions as a means of communication among members of a community' (Evans 2002, p.67). A similar point is made by Charles Taylor when we say 'the linguistic capacity is essentially shared: it sustains a shared consciousness of the world within which individuals differentiate themselves.....' (Taylor 2016, p.333). One line of thought which flows from this is that names have meaning because linguistic communities attach particular significance to them. For example, within our linguistic community the name 'Aristotle' cannot be divorced from our understanding of him as a philosopher. His being a philosopher is intrinsic to who Aristotle is understood to be. Being a philosopher is therefore an essential and not merely contingent property of Aristotle the person and individuates him as a distinct person. As McGinn puts it: 'According to the socialised description theory, the reference of a name is fixed by the people who have in their minds the correct description' (Mc Ginn 2016, p.51).

Kripke is wrong in failing to recognise that there are some properties of, say, Aristotle which are necessary along the lines suggested above, but he is correct in supposing, contrary to the descriptivist, that the descriptive properties giving meaning to the name 'Aristotle' cannot

1 See John Searle 'Proper Names' *Mind* 67, (1958), pp.166-73. See Searle's response to Kripke's critique in his 'Intentionality: an essay in the philosophy of mind' (Searle 1987).

be known a priori. To know what they are we have to investigate how the linguistic community defines 'Aristotle'. The properties constituting Aristotle's distinct identity as a person are necessary for our understanding of who we are referring to, but they are discovered through a posteriori investigation of the concepts and understandings embedded in the linguistic community. We need, therefore, an application of Kripke's notion of the necessary a posteriori to the shared meanings arising within linguistic communities.

In conclusion, we can say that Kripke too narrowly restricts the scope of essential properties through his failure to take account of the nature and significance of linguistic communities. He therefore fails to appreciate how we come to give meaning to names and to define what is essential about persons. His overall argument works well in relation to natural kinds (gold, water, etc.) but not so well when it comes to understanding the essential properties of persons.

Bibliography

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