A guide to Kripke's attack on descriptivism in Lectures I & II of *Naming & Necessity*

Jeff Speaks

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1 The Frege-Russell picture of names (26-29)

As we've seen, despite the fact that Russell did and Frege did not recognize the possibility of a class of non-descriptive, directly referential logically proper names, both had substantially similar pictures of how ordinary proper names work.

Both thought (i) that proper names have a sense as well as a reference, (ii) that proper names without a reference could still have a sense, and (iii) that there was no fundamental difference between proper names and definite descriptions. To illustrate (iii), Russell explicitly claimed that the meanings of proper names were equivalent to the meanings of descriptions associated with those names by speakers, and Frege consistently uses definite descriptions in explaining the sense of proper names, which indicates that he thought that there was some very close relationship between the sense of names and the sense of descriptions.

So, to understand how the classical picture of proper names worked, we have to understand how Frege and Russell thought of descriptions. And about this we can say the following: though Russell and Frege had different views of definite descriptions, with Russell but not Frege thinking of them as quantifier phrases, both thought that definite descriptions referred by having as their meaning some definite condition which is such that anything satisfying that condition would be the meaning of the description.

As we have seen, and as Kripke notes on pp. 28-29, there are powerful arguments in favor of this classical view of names. In particular, he mentions three:

1. Names (in the standard case) refer to objects. But this can seem hard to explain. Think about the name 'Hesperus'. It refers to an enormous object out in space that we can occasionally see. How did this series of sounds, or this bunch of marks on the board, get linked up with this object? No one flew out there and put a label on the planet. And, further, people can learn this name, and use it to refer to this far away object, even if they have never seen it, and know hardly anything about it. So even for these people, who seemingly have no contact with the planet itself, there is some important connection between this word and the planet. This can seem deeply puzzling; how did this link get set up? Or, as Kripke puts it, *how does the reference of a name get fixed?* As Kripke points out, it is an important strength for the classical picture of naming that it has a story to tell about this. According to the classical view, we associate descriptions with names, and the references of names are fixed by those descriptions. In the case of 'Hesperus', we associate with it the description 'the second planet from the sun', or 'the brightest star in the evening sky', or something like that. It's not so puzzling how we can associate these descriptions with names; we just stipulate that we are going to use 'Hesperus' as a name for the second planet from the sun, for example. And this is enough to make this description the meaning of the name, and enough to fix the referent via the description. So the classical picture seems to successfully dissolve this puzzle about reference.

2. The second motivation behind the classical view mentioned by Kripke echoes Frege's concern with identity statements. It seems clear that, when one says 'Hesperus is Phosphorus', one is not just, trivially, asserting the identity of an object with itself. Rather, one is saying something substantive, saying something which could be the result of a discovery. The description theory again has a natural and elegant solution: in such cases, we associate different descriptions with the two names, and it is often a substantive discovery that the same object satisfies the two descriptions.

3. The last motivation for the description theory is related to Russell's problem of negative existentials. Kripke asks how we are to analyze a question like, 'Did Aristotle exist?' It seems clear that the analysis cannot be that we are asking of some individual whether that individual exists — as Kripke says, "once we've *got* the thing, we know that it existed." Again, the classical theory is ready with a natural answer. What we are really asking, says the classical theory, is whether an someone existed who was the last great philosopher of antiquity, who wrote such and such books, who was the teacher of Alexander the Great, and so on.

Despite these strengths of the view, Kripke says, "I think it's pretty certain that the view of Frege and Russell is false."

2 Varieties of descriptivism

2.1 'Cluster' descriptivism (30-32, 61-67)

Kripke notes that there is an obvious problem with the classical theory of names, and one that other people, including Frege, have noticed. And this is that it does not seem that there is just one description associated with most names. For one, different people might associate different descriptions with the same name; some people might think of Aristotle as 'the last great philosopher of antiquity', others might think of him as 'the author of the *Metaphysics*', others as 'the most famous student of Plato.' There seems no way to decide which of these descriptions provides the meaning of the name, 'Aristotle.'

In a famous passage in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein states a related motivation for abandoning the classical view in favor of a view of names as more closely related to groups of descriptions:

> "If one says 'Moses did not exist', this may mean various things. It may mean: the Israelites did not have a *single* leader when they withdrew from Egypt — or: their leader was not called Moses — or: there cannot have been anyone who accomplished all that the Bible relates of Moses — ... But when I make a statement about Moses, — am I always ready to substitute some *one* of those descriptions for 'Moses'? ... Have i decided how much must be proved false for me to give up my proposition as false? Has the name 'Moses' got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases?" (*Investigations*, §79)

This has led people, Kripke thinks, to abandon the details of the classical picture without abandoning its underlying motivations. What people do is to say that the meaning of a proper name is given, not by a single description, but by a cluster, or a bunch, of descriptions. So the meaning of 'Aristotle' might be given by the list of descriptions we gave above, plus a bunch more. The referent of the name would then be that object, if any, who satisfied most of these descriptions, or enough of these descriptions, or something like that. The details of the theory needn't detain us. The point is that there is this basic problem with the classical theory, but that it seems as though we can revise that theory, while still keeping to the spirit of the view that the meanings of names are given by the descriptions associated with them by speakers.

In what follows, I will largely ignore this complication, and discuss the view which takes the meaning of a name to be given by a single description. We will come back and see whether the success of any of Kripke's arguments turns on this.

2.2 Meaning vs. reference-fixing (53, 57-60)

The next distinction Kripke discusses is between two different versions of the descriptive theory: between that version where the description is taken to be synonymous with (to give the meaning of) the name, and that version where the description is not syonymous with the name, but does determine its reference.

Kripke's applies this distinction to the case of proper names:

> "Frege should be criticized for using the term 'sense' in two senses. For he takes the sense of a designator to be its meaning; and he also takes it to be the way its reference is determined. Identifying the two, he supposes that both are given by definite descriptions."

The distinction between two kinds of descriptivism: the view that the reference of a name is fixed by the reference of its associated description, and the view that the meaning of a name is the same as the meaning of its associated description. The falsity of the second kind of descriptivism would not entail the falsity of the first kind; descriptions might fix the reference of names without giving their meaning.

2.3 Circular and non-circular versions of descriptivism (68-70)

A constraint on the definite descriptions of which the descriptivist can make use: the descriptions used must not make use of facts about the reference of the name. E.g.: 'Socrates' just means 'the man referred to by the name "Socrates".' Why the supposition that this description either fixes the reference or gives the meaning of the name is incoherent.

3 Kripke's three arguments against descriptivism

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

On pp. 48-49, Kripke introduces the notion of a *rigid designator*. He says: "Let's call something a *rigid designator* if in every possible world it designates the same object." (48)

Some examples to illustrate this: 'the first president of the United States', 'the tallest student in this class', 'the sum of 3 and 5.' Some descriptions, but not most, are rigid designators. Now consider a name like 'Aristotle.' Is this a rigid designator? Kripke thinks that ordinary proper names are rigid designators:

> "One of the intuitive theses I will maintain in these talks is that *names* are rigid designators. Certainly they seem to satisfy the intuitive test mentioned above: although someone other than the U. S. President in 1970 might have been the U. S. President in 1970 . . . no one other than Nixon might have been Nixon." (48)

Kripke is here relying on an intuitive test for the rigidity of a singular term:

> *Intuitive test for rigid designation*
>
> $\ulcorner n \urcorner$ is a rigid designator iff $\ulcorner n$ could not have existed without being n, and nothing other than n could have been $n \urcorner$ is true.

The right hand side of this, the thought goes, will come out true iff n refers to the same object with respect to every possible world. An important clarificatory point: the distinction between the reference of a term with respect to a possible world w and the reference of a term as used in w. (See Kripke's discussion of this distinction at p. 77.)

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 if one expression is a rigid designator, and another is not, the two cannot mean the same thing. Suppose that 'n' be an ordinary name which refers to some object o, and let 'the F' be an ordinary description uniquely satisfied by o. Then there is some possible world w with respect to which 'n' and 'the F' differ in reference. We can, using this, argue by cases to show that sentences differing only with respect to substitution of 'n' and 'the F' differ in truth-value with respect to w:

> *Case 1.* Suppose that o exists in w. Then $\ulcorner n$ is $n\urcorner$ is true, whereas $\ulcorner n$ is the $F\urcorner$ is not true.
>
> *Case 2.* Suppose that o does not exist in w. Then $\ulcorner$The F is the $F\urcorner$ is true, whereas $\ulcorner n$ is the $F\urcorner$ is not true.

But, if sentences differ in truth-value with respect to a possible world, then they have different truth conditions. If they have different truth conditions, they have different meaning. And if two sentences differing only by substitution of a pair of expressions differ in meaning, that pair of expressions must differ in meaning. So, no rigid designator can mean the same thing as any non-rigid designator. So, further, if Kripke is right that most simple names are rigid designators and most descriptions are not, it follows that (meaning) descriptivism is false.

This is one way of presenting Kripke's *modal argument*. 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.

The best place to look for a detailed examination of the modal argument, and possible replies to it, is Chapter 2 of Scott Soames' *Beyond Rigidity*.

3.2 The semantic argument (78-85)

Kripke has two other arguments against the descriptive theory of names. The first of these is very 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 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.) 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? No, we don't want to say this.

Further, 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. The example of 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.

3.3 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.

The proposition expressed by this sentence 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:

> 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.

One interesting question is whether this argument works against the view that the reference of a name is fixed by its associated description as well as against the view that the meaning of a name is given by its associated description.

4 Kripke's 'alternative picture' of reference (88-97)

We began this discussion by noting several arguments in favor of the classical theory of names. One of these which seemed particularly powerful was that it gives a story about how the reference of names is determined. Kripke reiterates this argument on p. 80.

Recall that the puzzle was to explain how our words get linked up with referents: how we manage to connect symbols with the things they refer to. The descriptivist answer was that names are connected with their referents via a process of association: speakers associate the names with certain properties (in the form of a description), and the name refers to whatever object in the world has those properties. This is an elegant picture, but we have already seen that it has several important defects. Semantic argument in its different forms: no object, many objects, wrong object.

So how does the reference of a name get fixed? Kripke discusses the example of how a the reference of a speaker's use of the name 'Richard Feynman' might get fixed:

> "Someone, let's say a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain, who has heard about, say Richard Feynman in the market place or somewhere, may be referring to Richard feynman [through his use of name 'Richard Feynman'] even though he can't remember from whom he first heard of Feynman or from whom he ever heard of Feynman. ... A certain passage of communication reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker. He then is referring to Feynman even though he can't identify him uniquely. He doesn't know what a Feynman diagram is ... Not only that: he'd have trouble distinguishing between Feynman and Gell-Mann. So he doesn't have to know these things, but, instead, a chain of communication going back to Feynman himself has been established, by virtue of his membership in a community which passed the name on from link to link, not by a ceremony that he makes in private in his study: 'By "Feynman" I shall mean the man who did such and such and such and such'." (91-2)

He returns to the view a few pages later:

> "A rough statement of a theory might be the following: An initial 'baptism' takes place. Here the object may be named by ostension, or the reference of the name may be fixed by a description. When the name is 'passed from link to link', the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it. If I hear the name 'Napoleon' and decide it would be a nice name for my pet aardvark, I do not satisfy this condition. ..." (97)

This effectively divides the theory of reference into two parts: questions about initial fixation of reference, and questions about maintenance of reference.

A difference in kind between Kripke's explanation of reference and that of the descriptivist: one is given in terms of facts about linguistic communities, and one in terms of facts about the psychologies of individual language users. Kripke's story seems to entail externalism about the meanings of names if, as seems plausible, two molecule-for-molecule duplicates could be embedded in communities which differ with respect to the histories of at least one of the names in the vocabularies of the relevant agents.

5 Results

Suppose that Kripke's arguments do establish that names do not (typically) have the meanings of definite descriptions. (Not everyone grants this, and we'll talk about some possible descriptivist replies.) What positive conclusions could we draw from this negative result?

- Some, like Scott Soames in *Beyond Rigidity*, think that we can draw the lesson that the meaning of a name is the object for which it stands. The idea is that if the meaning of a name is not some descriptive condition that an object satisfies iff it is the referent of the name, then what could it be other than the object itself? This is called 'Millianism' about names, and fits well with the Russellian approach to semantics. Kripke himself is careful not to draw this or any other positive conclusion about the semantics of names, and expresses some skepticism about the apparatus of propositions.
- It seems that, whatever the right characterization of the semantics of names, Kripke has vindicated something like Russell's distinction between two classes of singular terms: those which tag specific objects, and those which refer to whoever or whatever satisfies some condition.
- It further seems plausible that this distinction corresponds to something like the traditional distinction between de re and de dicto sentences/thoughts. One standard (modern) characterization of the distinction between de re and de dicto thoughts takes it to be, in the first instance, a distinction between two different kinds of thought ascriptions. An ascription is said to be de re iff it licenses *exportation*, i.e. if it licenses the following sort of inference:

  $$\frac{\text{John believes that } n/\text{the } F \text{ is } G.}{\exists x \text{ John believes } x \text{ is } G.}$$

  It seems plausible that ordinary names do, but ordinary descriptions do not, license inferences of this kind. (Though not everyone believes this either, and there are some plausible-sounding counter examples about which it is hard to know what to say.) It is further plausible that this distinction between kinds of thought ascriptions corresponds to some kind of difference in the thoughts ascribed. So, it seems plausible that one moral of Kripke's discussion is that sentences involving names express de re propositions about the references of those names. This is something to keep in mind when we turn to theories of mental content. The de re/de dicto distinction appears to pick out a genuine distinction between kinds of contents which should be captured by an acceptable foundational account of mental content.