

The modal argument and scope distinctions

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One way of reading Kripke's modal argument is as follows:

1. If two expressions are not substitutable *salva veritate* in all contexts, then they do not have the same content.
2. For any non-rigid description 'the F ', and any ordinary name ' n ', 'Necessarily, if the F exists, then the F is uniquely F ' will be true and 'Necessarily, if the F exists, then n is uniquely F ' false.

C. Ordinary names do not have the contents of non-rigid descriptions.

One reaction to this argument (first by Dummett in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, but also in more recent pieces) is that it ignores the fact that descriptions can take wide scope over modal operators. So, for example, in the sentence

Necessarily, the greatest philosopher of antiquity is the greatest philosopher of antiquity.

(We're ignoring for simplicity the fact that we are considering only worlds in which the description is uniquely satisfied — building this back in would make things more complicated, but would not affect the force of the argument.) Russell's theory of descriptions permits the following two readings of the scope of the underlined occurrence of the description:

Necessarily ([the x : x is the greatest philosopher of antiquity] x is the greatest philosopher of antiquity)

[the x : x is the greatest philosopher of antiquity] Necessarily (x is the greatest philosopher of antiquity)

In the first sentence, the description takes narrow scope with respect to the modal operator; in the second sentence it takes wide scope over the modal operator. Importantly, the first interpretation seems true, and the second false.

But the problem for descriptivism was supposed to be that it has to treat sentences like the above as true. So can't the descriptivist just solve the modal argument by saying that names have the same meanings as *definite descriptions which always take wide scope over modal operators*?

Things aren't quite that easy. Consider the following version of the modal argument (which seems to be related to what Kripke had in mind in the preface to *N & N*, and is laid out explicitly in the second chapter of Soames, *Beyond Rigidity*).

1. The proposition expressed by 'The greatest philosopher of antiquity is the greatest philosopher of antiquity' = the proposition expressed by 'Aristotle is the greatest philosopher of antiquity.'
(descriptivist premise, assumed for *reductio*)
 2. The proposition expressed by 'The greatest philosopher of antiquity is the greatest philosopher of antiquity' is a necessary truth.
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- C. The proposition expressed by 'Aristotle is the greatest philosopher of antiquity' is a necessary truth.

But (C) is clearly false, and the relevant description doesn't even occur in a sentence in which there is a modal operator, so it can't take wide scope over it. Indeed, they aren't even used, but are only mentioned.

But what, you may ask, happens if these definite descriptions take wide scope, not only over modal operators, but also over quotation marks, running rampant over use/mention distinctions? Such a suggestion runs counter to all that is good and right in the world. What should the proponent of such a view say if we reformulate the above argument to replace the mentioned sentences with names of them, so that the definite descriptions weren't even explicitly mentioned?

For a good argument against this kind of wide-scoping view and an excellent discussion of the relevant issues, see Ben Caplan's "Against Widescopism", *Phil Studies* 125.2 (or on his web site).