The contingent a priori

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So far Kripke has introduced a conceptual distinction between necessity and a prioricity; defined the notion of rigid designation; and introduced a distinction between fixing the reference of a term and giving its meaning. Kripke next puts these three pieces together in an argument that there are some contingent a priori propositions.

The main example of the contingent a priori Kripke is discusses is the example of the standard meter. Kripke imagines using the length of a certain stick — 'Stick S' — to fix the reference of the expression 'one meter.' He then asks us to consider the status of the proposition expressed by the sentence

> The length of stick S at time t0 is one meter.

He first argues that this proposition expresses a contingent rather than a necessary truth:

> '. . . there is an intuitive difference between the phrase 'one meter' and the phrase 'the length of S at t0'. The first phrase is meant to designate rigidly a certain length in all possible worlds, which in the actual world happens to be the length of the stick S at t0. On the other hand, 'the length of S at t0' does not designate anything rigidly. In some counterfactual situations the stick might have been longer and in some shorter, if various stresses and strains had been applied to it. So we can say of this stick, the same way as we would of any other of the same substance and length, that if heat of a given quantity had been applied to it, it would have expanded to such and such a length. . . . So [the fact that we have used stick S to fix the reference of 'one meter'] does not make it a necessary truth that S is one meter long at t0. The reason is that one designator ('one meter') is rigid and the other designator ('the length of S at t0') is not.' (56-57)

The basic idea here is that this claim is contingent for just the same reason that any sentence of the form

> The F is n.

where 'the F ' is a non-rigid designator and 'n' is a rigid designator, is contingent. If one expression is a rigid designator and the other is not, then there is some object o such that in some world one of the expressions refers to it and the other does not. But then the sentence will be false with respect to that possible world, and hence not necessary.

But is the proposition expressed by this sentence a priori? Kripke argues that it is:

> 'What, then, is the epistemological status of the statement 'Stick S is one meter long at t0', for someone who has fixed the meter system by reference to stick S? It would seem that he knows it a priori. For if he used stick S to fix the reference of the term 'one meter', then as a result of this kind of 'definition' ... he knows automatically, without further investigation, that S is one meter long. ... So in this sense, there are contingent a priori truths.' (56)

Kripke's idea here seems to be that, though it may not be a priori for later users, this claim is at least a priori knowable for the parties to the initial stipulation which fixes the reference of 'one meter.' The intuitive idea is that if we have stipulated that 'one meter' is to stand for that length, whatever it is, which is the current length of stick S, then we can know, just by knowing this stipulation, that stick S is one meter long. But this is surely enough to make the knowledge in question a priori.