

# Necessity and rigid designation

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Jeff Speaks

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## 1 The separation of the modalities (33-39)

One of the key moves that Kripke makes early in the book is clearly separating out the categories of necessity and the a priori:

'Philosophers have talked ... [about] various categories of truth, which are sometimes called 'a priori', 'analytic,' 'necessary' ... these terms are often used as if whether there are things answering to these concepts is an interesting question, but we might as well regard them all as meaning the same thing.  
...

... First the notion of a prioricity is a concept of epistemology. I guess the traditional characterization from Kant goes something like: a priori truths are those which can be known independently of any experience. ... The second concept which is in question is that of necessity. ... what I am concerned with here is a notion which is not a notion of epistemology but of metaphysics ... We ask whether something might have been true, or might have been false. Well, if something is false, it's obviously not necessarily true. If it is true, might it have been otherwise? Is it possible that, in this respect, the world should have been different than the way that it is? ... This in and of itself has nothing to do with anyone's knowledge of anything. It's certainly a philosophical thesis, and not a matter of obvious definitional equivalence, either that everything a priori is necessary or that everything necessary is a priori. ... at any rate they are dealing with two different domains, two different areas, the epistemological and the metaphysical.' (33-35)

Kripke's point here is that the identification of the necessary with the a priori is a substantive one, and does not follow trivially from what we mean when we say 'necessary' or 'a priori.'

From the fact that these two categories are conceptually distinct, it does not follow that there are any examples of truths which are necessary but not knowable a priori, or a priori but not necessary. Indeed, one can give intuitive arguments that the two categories must coincide.

Kripke will go on to argue both that there are necessary truths which are a posteriori, and that there are a priori truths which are contingent.

## 2 Essentialism & rigid designation (39-53)

### 2.1 *The doctrine of essentialism*

Kripke next turns to the distinction between accidental and essential properties.

Let's say that an essential property of an object *o* is a property such that *o* could not have existed without having that property; or, put another way, it is a property such that *o* could not have been *o* without having that property. Properties of an object which are not essential are accidental.

Essentialism is the view that there is a genuine distinction between essential and accidental properties. Modality *de re* vs. modality *de dicto*.

### 2.2 *Quine's argument against essentialism*

Kripke considers a very influential argument against essentialism which was advanced by the American philosopher W.V. Quine:

'Now, some people say: ...it's only a statement or state of affairs that can be either necessary or contingent! Whether a particular necessarily or contingently has a certain property depends on the way it's described. . . . What is Quine's famous example? If we consider the number 9, does it have the property of necessary oddness? ... Certainly it's true in all possible worlds, let's say, it couldn't have been otherwise, that nine is odd. Of course, 9 could also equally well be picked out as the number of planets. It is not necessary, not true in all possible worlds, that the number of planets is odd. For example if there had been eight planets, the number of planets would not have been odd. . . . whether an object has the same property in all possible worlds depends not just on the object itself, but on how it is described. So it's argued.

It is even suggested in the literature, that though a notion of necessity may have some sort of intuition behind it ... this notion of a distinction between necessary and contingent properties is just a doctrine made up by some bad

philosopher, who (I guess) didn't realize that there are different ways of referring to the same thing.'

There are different ways to reconstruct Quine's argument; informally it goes something like this:

Necessarily, nine is greater than 7.

It is not necessary that the number of planets is greater than 7.

'Nine' and 'the number of planets' both refer to the number 9.

So does that object, 9, have the property of being greater than 7 essentially, or not? It seems that it depends how one refers to that number. It has the property of being greater than 7 essentially relative to referring to it as 'nine,' but not relative to referring to it as 'the number of planets.' It makes no sense to ask whether the number itself — the thing referred to by both of these expressions — has the property essentially, or not.

Quine's view is thus that the doctrine of essentialism is worse than false — it is close to unintelligible.

Compare to the case of belief: does Lois believe of that object, Clark/Superman, that it flies? It seems that there is no answer to this question; she believes it when she refers to that object one way, but not another way.

### 2.3 Kripke's reply to Quine

Kripke replies:

'What's the difference between asking whether it's necessary that 9 is greater than 7 or whether it's necessary that the number of planets is greater than 7? Why does one show anything more about essence than the other? The answer to this question might be intuitively 'Well, look, the number of planets might have been different from what it in fact is. I doesn't make any sense, though, to say nine might have been different from what it in fact is.'

Kripke here is drawing a distinction between 'the number of planets' and 'nine.' The distinction is that while the first of the following sentence seems plainly true, the second seems just as plainly false:

The number of planets might have been different from what it actually is.

Nine might have been different from what it actually is.

What explains this difference? Kripke thinks that if we consider some way the world might have been — i.e., some possible world — and we ask what the number of planets

is in that world, we will get different answers depending on what that world is like. But if we consider different possible worlds and ask what nine is in that world, we always get the same answer — the number nine.

Kripke captures this distinction using a new (and very influential) bit of terminology. He says:

‘Let’s call something a rigid designator if in every possible world it designates the same object.’ (48)

In these terms, ‘nine’ is a rigid designator, whereas ‘the number of planets’ is not.

Some examples to illustrate this: ‘the first president of Canada’, ‘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, as elsewhere, relying on an intuitive test for the rigidity of a singular term:

*Intuitive test for rigid designation*

‘n’ is a rigid designator iff ‘n could not have existed without being n, and nothing other than n could have been n’ is true.

The right hand side of this, the thought goes, will come out true if and only if 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.)

What does this have to do with Quine’s argument? The idea here is that when we are interested in whether some object o has a property essentially or accidentally, we can only test for this by looking at truth values of sentences of the form, ‘Necessarily, n is F’ if ‘n’ rigidly designates o. For if ‘n’ does not rigidly designate o, then the truth value of the sentence in question depends on fact about whether objects other than o ‘are F.’ But if we are interested in the essential properties of o, it’s irrelevant how things stand, or could have stood, with objects other than o.

#### 2.4 A Quinean reply

A defender of Quine might reply as follows: skepticism about essentialism involves skepticism about the intelligibility of de re modality. Kripke’s anti-skeptical response involves

the notion of rigid designation. But that is defined in terms of an object being the referent of an expression in various possible worlds — and that is itself a kind of de re modality. So, Kripke's response to Quine's argument is objectionably circular.

It is here that Kripke's remarks about our pre-philosophical intuitions are relevant. Kripke emphasizes the fact that in our pre-philosophical thought, we take it for granted that we can say things about which properties certain objects might have had or lacked:

'I don't know if some philosophers have not realized this; but at any rate it is very far from being true that this idea [that a property can meaningfully be held to be essential or accidental to an object independently of its description] is a notion which has no intuitive content, which means nothing to the ordinary man. Suppose that someone said, pointing at Nixon, 'That's the guy who might have lost'. Someone else says, 'Oh no, if you describe him as 'Nixon', then he might have lost; but, of course, describing him as the winner, then it is not true that he might have lost'. Now which one is being the philosopher here, the unintuitive man? It seems to me obviously to be the second.'

Why does this matter? Kripke thinks of the situation like this. We come to philosophy already with an intuitive grasp of de re modality. Quine gives us an argument that this notion makes no sense. But we can reply to that argument by extending our intuitive grasp of de re modality to define the distinction between rigid and non-rigid designators. Quine can reply that this distinction presupposes the notion he was trying to challenge. But that is fine — Kripke was not trying to explain de re modality to someone who has no grasp of it; he was only trying to show how we who do have a grasp of it can reply to an argument against its intelligibility.

Compare: two different kinds of skeptical argument against religious belief, or skepticism that our color words make sense.