

Kripke and Rigid Designators: A Descriptivist in Disguise

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In his work, *Naming and Necessity* Saul Kripke argues against many previous philosophers, such as Russell, who have offered a descriptivist account of language. Russell looks to break everything down into more atomistic pieces in a search for truth. The same can be said for the descriptivist theory of language—he defines language in terms of its descriptive capacity. For instance, the name “George W. Bush” would be interchangeable with, “the President of the United States.” For a descriptivist these two terms simply mean the same thing. It is like saying A equals B. Kripke argues these two terms are not the same thing; one is a rigid designator while the other is a non-rigid designator.

For Kripke, a rigid designator is a term that picks out the same thing in all possible worlds in which that thing exists. Yet another condition that must be satisfied in order to be a rigid designator is that the term must pick nothing out in the possible worlds in which the object doesn’t exist. Following these two conditions, rigid designators are words that are always proper names and names that are of natural kinds. So, according to Kripke, it follows that “George W. Bush” is a rigid designator, while the “President of the United States,” is not a rigid designator. Furthermore, since rigid designators refer to names of natural kinds; “water” and “H₂O” would also be considered rigid designators.

Once a word is dubbed with a certain meaning, of course people are going to use it to communicate with others. After all, this is what words and languages are used for. So once the meaning of a word is fixed by means of a baptism, person A passes it on to person B, who passes it on to person C, and so on. This is what Kripke refers to as a “causal chain,” in which meaning can be traced to its origins. What we are really doing is fulfilling a role in the cycle of language in which we borrow reference from previous lenders and, in turn, pass it on to others. Yet, like playing the game Operator, in which you whisper a sentence or two from one person to the next to compare the final result with the initial saying, it would seem as though

meaning could be slightly altered from each person to the next. So how are we then to be sure that we are using with the same referent? More importantly, does it really matter that we are consistently using this word with the same referent in which it was called?

Kripke's causal chain is a way of tracking the referent. In a given case, someone baptizes a word and picks out a referent. For instance when a baby is born, usually the parents will ascribe a certain name to this child. The parents of this child will tell person A, who will tell person B, who will tell person C, and so on. In this sense, there is a causal chain that links the original baptizing of the referent to the user of the word. It would then appear as though we are only successful in using a word with a fixed reference properly when we have used it in the same way as those before us in the causal chain leading all the way back to the dubbing of that word. Yet, as in the example previously given, or other instances in which a person changes their name, a new causal chain will be contained somewhere in the previous causal chain.

When we call a person by a name, it doesn't seem as though we do so because their parent(s) gave them this name at birth. Instead, it appears as though we do so in large part because of continuing social affirmations. We hear this person called by their name, let's say "X," by several others, and they themselves admit this is their name. So we call them by X. But wait! It has all been a lie! The person's real name is "Y," "X" is only their nickname. Again, this isn't a problem for Kripke's notion, this type of change would be captured in the causal chain as a just another (sub) causal chain.

There seems to be a problem with ascribing a certain name to a certain referent in the beginning of the causal chain. What I have in mind here can be demonstrated by the example of parents naming a baby by pointing to a child and saying, "This is person X." How are we to be sure that these parents are naming the baby? For all we know they could be pointing past the baby to another person whom they intend to name. They could also be naming the collection of photons from certain spectrums of light causing the baby to retain a certain color. These examples may not seem to be a real problem from a practical, everyday stand point – parents name newly born children everyday and we do not seem to have a problem using their name to pick them out. Yet the message here is that Kripke doesn't provide a good account of how a rigid designator and a referent are actually baptizing. For this theory to work, we need a way to ground these two, as this is the foundation for the entire causal chain.

The same line of reasoning could apply if we were to relate two names to the same referent. For instance, we could say, "Wes Hansen lives in Chowchilla." We could also then say that, "Lefty O'Doul

lives in Chowchilla." Given that my new Philosophy 146 name is Lefty O'Doul and I am Wes Hansen, this wouldn't be a problem at all. The causal chain of each rigid designator would intermingle with one another and, I suppose, narrow into one causal chain as each has the same referent.

Another objection to Kripke's account of language has been given by Bach. He says we should imagine a referent, "with respect to some counter-factual situation or to whoever bears the name in the counter-factual situation" (Bach 1987, p. 21). He goes on to provide the example that we could mean, "There is a possible situation in which [the actual person] Ronald Reagan is the older brother of the president or that there is a possible situation in which the older brother of the president bears the name 'Ronald Reagan'" (Bach 1987, p. 21). This is merely toying with words and not a genuine criticism of Kripke. Sure, there could be a possible world in which the older brother of the president is named Ronald Reagan. But this doesn't succeed in picking out the same referent as intended if the referent were the person Ronald Reagan. Since this example doesn't fulfill the necessary requirement of picking out the same person in all possible worlds that Kripke has established, it isn't a good counter example to Kripke's argument.

The real problem at hand is that at the root of Kripke's argument is a huge metaphysical commitment, one of ontological essentialism. There is some ontologically necessary reason that George W. Bush is in fact George W. Bush. It doesn't matter if we call him "El Presidente," or simply "G.W.," or any other name. This is not what Kripke is saying, it doesn't matter what we happen to call the person "George W. Bush." What he does seem to be saying, is that no matter what term we use, there is a necessary thing that it is to be the person George W. Bush, as long as the term is a proper names or a name that is of natural kinds, it will designate rigidly.

So along the same lines, it had to be the case that water is H_2O (although not that "water" is H_2O). It could not be possible that it turned out otherwise. There is some sort of necessary structure that makes the thing we call "water" water. It wouldn't matter if we never discovered water's molecular structure or we refer to H_2O as "glue" instead of "water" as water must be H_2O . It could be argued that "water is H_2O " is synthetic *a posteriori* since we had to do experiments to figure this out. Yet if Kripke's argument that both "A" and "B" (in this case, "A" being "water" and "B" being " H_2O ") are rigid designators is right, then this is really just an analytic *a priori* claim. So, to summon Hume's fork, if we are saying that A equals B necessarily, then this implies logical necessity. Kripke would have to admit this much as we are speaking of all logically

possible worlds. So then it would seem that Kripke is really just saying that A equals A because what it means to be "A" is "B." This leads us to the very descriptivist attitude that Kripke is attempting to refute, he is just arguing for it in a new way.

There also seems to be quite a heavy influence of works by Descartes and Aristotle that leads to a similar weakness in Kripke's argument. His argument assumes the modernist view of identity. Yet, what exactly does it mean to be George W. Bush or Paris Hilton and why are these rigid designators to begin with? Kripke seems to make a commitment to a modernist view that there is some substance that makes George W. Bush necessarily George W. Bush.

Upon further analysis of Kripke's philosophy of language, such as rigid designators, it seems that he is wrong. I would like to offer a more deconstructivist approach to how words in general have meaning in opposition to Kripke. Words don't somehow link up to things in the real world. Along the same line of thinking, words don't get their meaning by pointing out things in the real world. Words get their meanings by referring to words in other contexts. This removes us from making any form of metaphysical commitment, especially the ever-so-shady essentialism. It is our willingness to believe in words that makes language work.

It seems as though the idea behind cluster concepts has some good applications in the real use of language, at least from a pragmatic standpoint. Yet, going back to the cluster concept idea, non-rigid designators are necessary to explain rigid designators. If we stumble upon a person who does not know who George W. Bush is (lucky them) how are we going to explain who this person is? A rigid designator by itself is insufficient to explain this, yet a cluster concept would be quite good to explain it. It would seem that we would have to explain the rigid designator by using a cluster concept. If somebody asked, "Who is George W. Bush?" we would respond by saying that, "He is the current president of the United States," or some other sentence that would fit into a cluster concept. Furthermore, the idea of a causal chain also sounds like a good way to ground a rigid designator and, I suppose in turn, maintain a certain truth value. Yet how are we to undertake this project? From a practical standpoint, this just seems like an enormously complex project.

Kripke says that a rigid designator is a word that picks out the same thing in all possible worlds in which it designates at all. Examples of rigid designators include proper names and names of proper types. There is then a baptism of these rigid designators, from which a causal chain catches the uses of these rigid designators. Kripke argues against the descriptivist views of language offered by

previous philosophers such as Russell. Yet, at least from the perspective of a Humean criticism, Kripke's views aren't so different from Russell's. Kripke's argument also seems to have a weak spot in that it assumes the modernist view of identity. There also seems to be some good reasons why we should have cluster concepts that Kripke's argument doesn't really account for.

REFERENCES

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