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Kripkean Theory of Reference

A Cognitive Way

Roshan Praveen Xalxo

Kripkean Argument Against Descriptivists

Kripke has distinguished two versions of "cluster concept theory" of reference. According to the first, proper names do not differ (in meaning) with descriptions that users associate them with. While the second version recognizes that the proper name may not have the synonymy with descriptions, but the referent of the proper name satisfies the descriptions associated with name.¹ Kripke calls the first version "the theory of meaning" and second "the theory of reference". In *Lecture I of Naming and Necessity*, Kripke argues against the first version which he calls *modal argument*. Let *n* be the name Manmohan Singh. The cluster of descriptions *D* such as the following gives the meaning of the name:

- a. the prime minister of India in 2012
- b. a graduate from Oxford University
- c. son of Gurmukh Singh and Amrit Kaur
- d. the first Sikh to be the prime minister
- e. the cluster of all other descriptions that speaker associates with Manmohan Singh.

According to this thesis a name gets its meaning from the most of which are true of the thing named. So examining it under modal test, we find that "if *n* existed then *n* was *D*" is necessary truth, because *D* gives the meaning of *n*. As stated earlier, if this is true then, the meaning and proposition expressed do not change when *D* is

¹ Scott Soames, 2003, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, vol. II, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 337.

substituted for *n*. That means, if "*n* existed, then *n* was *D*" = if "*D* existed then *D* was *D*". Applying it to the example above, we come to realize that if Manmohan Singh existed then Manmohan Singh was *D*, and it is a necessary truth. A proposition is a necessarily true if (1) it is true in the actual world, and (2) is true, had the world been in any other possible state. Kripke points out that that is not the case in the above example. It is very much possible that in a possible world, Manmohan Singh may have existed but not even a single description would have been true of him:

[A]n object could have had properties very different from its most striking actual properties or from the properties we use to identify it.²

The above argument does not refute the second thesis because the latter does not claim that name and descriptions are synonymous. The second is about reference fixing. To argue against the second thesis Kripke introduces new understanding of names and descriptions. According to it, proper names are rigid designators. Now we call something, "a rigid designator if in every possible world it designates the same object".³

In order to determine which singular term or natural kind, call it name or description, would be rigid designator, Kripke applies a linguistic test. Soames has described it effectively when he says, "*t* is a rigid designator iff the sentence the individual that is (was) actually *t* could not have existed without being *t*, and nothing other than the individual that is (was) actually *t* could have been *t*' expresses a truth".⁴ So when we apply Kripke's modal argument we realize that:

1. Names are rigid designators.
 2. Descriptions associated with names are not.
- ∴ Names are not synonymous with descriptions.

Now the second thesis asserts that if *D* fixes the referent of *n*, then,

- i. *D* = the unique individual *O* and,

² Saul A. Kripke, 1980, *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (originally published in 1972), p. 77.

³ *Ibid.*: 48.

⁴ Soames 2003: 342.

- ii. $O =$ referent of n .
- iii. If $D \neq$ the unique individual O , then n has no referent.
- iv. The speaker knows a priori that "if there is n , then $n = D$ ", is true.

In the *Lecture II*, of *Naming and Necessity* Kripke offers counter-examples to all these corollaries. Taking first, i.e. corollary (i), he argues that most often we do not believe that the description we associate with name does pick out a unique individual. For example, when we say "Roman orator", "Roman statesman", etc. we do not uniquely refer to Cicero. For, how do we know that it refers to Cicero and not to Mark Anthony?⁵

The corollaries (ii) and (iii) have more of the same argument. Here, one, "by giving same unique properties can . . . know what the reference of (your) name is".⁶ But Kripke questions it, "is it the case, then, that if most of the Φ 's are satisfied by a unique object y , then y is the referent of the name " X ". . .".⁷ Giving a counter-example he argues that, fictionally, if Gödel was "not the author of Gödel theorem", but Schmidt, then "when our ordinary man uses the name Gödel", he really means to refer to Schmidt, because Schmidt is the unique person satisfying the description, "the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic".⁸ But is this so? No. Here D does apply to unique individual O , but O is not the referent. Again, if D does not apply to unique individual, this does not mean that name has no referent. For example, Peano axioms. It is said that the so-called "Peano axioms" — which characterize the sequence of natural numbers — were not first discovered by Peano but by Dedekind. Peano gave its credit to Dedekind, but we always refer to Peano as the discoverer of Peano axiom. But the actual referent of the discoverer of Peano axioms is Dedekind.⁹

The final corollary of description theory is that speaker knows a priori that "if n exists then n is D " is true. Kripke argues against it saying that it is false. Suppose one does not know Kautilya, and if

⁵ Kripke 1980: 81.

⁶ Ibid.: 84.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.: 84.

⁹ Ibid.

Kauṭilya existed then does one know a priori that Kauṭilya was the author of *Arthaśāstra*? Certainly not. This knowledge is a posteriori. Kripke therefore seems suggesting that, "there is no general semantic rule specifying that the referent of a name is the individual designated by descriptions associated with it by speakers".¹⁰

Kripkean Theory of Reference

An object is "baptized". It is done either by ostension or by a description. "Description used is not synonymous with the name it introduces, but rather fixes its reference."¹¹ New people get acquainted with the object/person by such name and begin to use the name for their purpose. A link gets connected. One may use the name referring to something else too, but it is not what is referred by the source. "If I hear the name, 'Napoleon' and decide it would be a nice name for my pet aardvark, I do not satisfy this condition."¹² This chain of reference fixing continues from people to people, from community to community. So in this case, the information that a person gets by associating an object with the name does not determine its referent, rather, "the referent of a use of a name by a speaker x is determined by the historical chain connecting x 's use to speakers from whom x acquired the name connecting those speakers to their sources, and leading ultimately back to the individual baptized with the name".¹³

Thus what determine reference are not a speaker's beliefs, but the chain of use in which the speaker stands. Referring is not a determination in isolation; rather, it is a community effort.¹⁴

The Responses

Responding to Kripke's argument John Searle (1983) offered an argument in defence of descriptivist theory. He suggests that one is required to accept that the reference fixing content associated with the use of a given name need not be the sort of content expressible by a single definite description or even by open disjunction of such expressions. For, there is no reason to insist that reference-determining

¹⁰ Soames 2003: 363.

¹¹ Kripke 1980: 96.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Soames 2003: 365.

¹⁴ Ibid.

content must *be expressible linguistically*. His argument for saying so is that the reference-fixing content is identical to the totality of "intentional content" or a mental content, a given speaker associates with the name in question. His view can be summarized by asserting, that "one can simply rigidify the reference-fixing description".¹⁵

In order to rigidify the reference-fixing description, descriptivists present an argument involving an account of content. According to them the descriptions that give the content of proper names may contain indexical expressions. That is to say that the occurrence of these expressions denotes fixed parameters of a context. For example when "I" is uttered, it denotes the speaker at a particular time and in a particular place all within a context. But, when we broaden our perspective to include modal evaluation, it is natural that we add "actual" to the list. That is to say, when "one is in the context of possible worlds semantics, 'actual' indicates the world of the context".¹⁶ Thus any description where the word "actual" occurs would be rigid. And any description such as "the actual F" would rigidly denote the object which is in fact F even in worlds in which that object fails to be the unique F.¹⁷

Kripke on the other hand has never argued that his modal considerations refuted every version of the descriptive account of content. Moreover, for a pure descriptivist there is a qualitative definite description such that necessarily a thing *is* if and only if it satisfies that description. And it must be some name-free, demonstrative-free and indexical-free definite description.¹⁸

Michael Dummett attacks Kripke's position arguing that "the rigidity of proper names does not affect the content of modally 'simple' sentences, that is, sentences not containing modal terms".¹⁹ Dummett argues that without postulating a semantic difference between proper names and definite descriptions, it can be shown that sentences can have different content. Let us take an example:

¹⁵ Marga Reimer, "Reference", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reference>

¹⁶ Jason Stanley, 2000, "Names and Rigid Description", *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 569.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Christopher Hughes, 2004, *Kripke: Names, Necessity and Identity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 11.

¹⁹ Stanley 2000: 571.

- (a) Manmohan Singh might not have been the prime minister of India.
- (b) Manmohan Singh might not have been Manmohan Singh.

It is clear that both sentences have different truth content — (a) is true, whereas (b) is contradictory. On Kripke's account, this is because we assume "Manmohan Singh" [MMS] as a rigid designator whereas "the prime minister of India" as non-rigid designator. On Dummett's account this can be formulated as the following:

- (a') For some x such that $MMS = x$ [$\diamond x \neq$ the prime minister of India].
- (b') For some x, y such that $MMS = x$ and $MMS = y$ [$\diamond x \neq y$].²⁰

In this case (a') is true and (b') is false. This distinction is achieved without postulating a semantic difference between proper names and definite descriptions. Thus, it results in that if Dummett's account is correct then proper name can be identified with definite descriptions which can possess an exceptionally wide scope with respect to modal operators.²¹

Kripke responds to it arguing that Dummett's account is problematic. For example, if " T " is an expression that is classified as rigid and " T_0 " is classified as non-rigid description and has the same content as " T ", then we observe that

- (c) " T is T " is a necessarily true sentence.
- (d) " T is T_0 " is not a necessarily true sentence.

Here both sentences are true, but their content is different, which on Dummett's account would be puzzling and problematic. So Kripke concludes that "the difference between proper names and definite descriptions must be attributed to a difference in the semantic values they receive".²²

Gareth Evans points out that the causal theory ignores the importance of surrounding context.²³ It leads to the problem of

²⁰ Stanley 2000: 571.

²¹ Ibid.: 572.

²² Ibid.: 573.

²³ Gareth Evans, 1973, "The Causal Theory of Names", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 47, p. 193.

reference change. The problem of reference change occurs because in causal theory there is some kind of magic in denoting, which is taken for granted that once this denotation is passed on cannot be lost. Let us consider that when challenged, an individual X replies that "lion does not prey on rats". This is literally and factually true. But it turns out that Y, who hears it from X, fails to understand, or rather understands it literally. And hence, Y misses the particular context, in which it actually referred to a "Don" of an area, who would not kill the weak. Therefore if Y has to pass the information to Z, she would take the literal understanding of the saying and would miss the mark. This results in the phenomenon of reference change. Again, a causal connection between one's use of the name and use by others is not necessary for anyone to use the name to say of things. For example, when I call my room "a den of lion", I do not mean the same with others who may understand in a literal sense the "den of a lion".

It is a serious problem with causal theory of reference that it appears to be at odds with the phenomenon of reference change Evans gives the example quoting Isaac Taylor's book:

In the case of 'Madagascar' a hearsay report of Malay or Arab sailors misunderstood by Marco Polo. . . has had the effect of transferring a corrupt form of the name of a portion of the African mainland to the great African Island.²⁴

How does Kripkean causal theory explain the phenomenon of reference change is thus not clear. It seems as if there is some sort of magic taking place, when, while being in a chain of use, the original name refers to a different referent.

Michael Devitt and Evans have tried to offer a developed version of causal theory, but it would be like going off the track, if it is discussed here. Instead, it is adequate to admit that Kripke's picture is not the picture perfect. It needs to be supplemented with the theory of meaning — a theory that accounts for the fact that proper names appear to have some sort of meaning or cognitive content.

In making responses to these charges it is apt to bring to our notice that in the case of "Napoleon", one does not satisfy the condition when she intends to use "Napoleon" for her pet aardvark.²⁵ But the

²⁴ Gareth Evans, 1973: 196.

²⁵ Evans 1973: 96.

case of "Madagascar" is different. Kripke argues that it is a case where a name is used without that name's referring to its baptismal referent. He writes:

. . . we use names to communicate with other speakers in a common language. This character (social) dictates ordinarily that a speaker intends to use a name the way as it was transmitted to him, but in the "Madagascar" case this social character dictates that present intention to refer to an island overrides the distant link to native usage.²⁶

Had Marco Polo been apprised of his mistake, he would not presumably have used the name "Madagascar" for an island.

Again, in the Preface to his work Kripke brings to our notice that:

. . . for language as we have it, we could speak of names as having a unique referent if we adopted a terminology, analogous to the practice of calling homonyms distinct "words", according to which uses of phonetically the same sounds to name distinct objects count as distinct names.²⁷

If we correctly understand Kripke then we know that

the native whom Marco Polo misunderstood says "Madagascar" is a portion of the African mainland and the European who learned "Madagascar" from Marco Polo says "Madagascar" is an island off Africa, they are using different names.²⁸

One name is applied by natives to a portion of the African mainland and another name by Marco Polo and other Europeans to an island. It is a case where the same name does not involve starting out with one referent and ending up with another. There is no reference change. The mythological "Sitā" and my neighbour "Sitā" in spite of having same name do not refer to the same individual. So is the case with "Madagascar". Even such argument fails to capture the importance of "surrounding context". Hence, causal theory needs to be augmented, and that is what I have tried to do in the subsequent pages.

²⁶ Evans 1973: 163.

²⁷ Ibid.: 7-8.

²⁸ Hughes 2004: 41.

Kuhn and the Act of Dubbing

Kuhn has not made a direct attack on Kripke but shows the vulnerability of rigid designation in his paper, "Dubbing and Redubbing: Vulnerability of Rigid Designation".²⁹ Kuhn's attack is indirectly towards causal theory of reference but his arguments also implicitly puncture the very idea of necessary truths and Kripke's arguments for essentialism. What Kuhn is up to, is to show that rigid designation functions rigidly only for a period of time in scientific development. With the change of time, history and context, lexicon of a language community requires a change in meaning and therefore reference. For Kuhn:

To possess a lexicon, a structured vocabulary is to have access to the varied set of worlds which that lexicon can be used to describe.³⁰

Lexicons from different cultures and different historical periods open a different set of possible worlds before us. An enriched lexicon may be used to describe the worlds previously accessible only with another lexicon, but it requires learning a new language. Mere translatability does not ensure the understanding of a lexicon acquired from another history or culture. In Kuhnian sense, therefore

Knowing what a word means is, knowing how to use it for communication with other members of the language community within which it is current.³¹

Hence, language learning is central; for words do not have meanings individually, but in associations with other words within a semantic field.

In Kuhnian sense terms are learned in use. Causal theory of reference fixes referent of the term without employing meaning and descriptions as such. Terms thus involve act of dubbing. In casual theory there is a chain linking the later user of a term to the first user.

Now according to Kuhnian argument, the change of lexicon results

²⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn, 1990, "Dubbing and Redubbing: The Vulnerability of Rigid Designation", *Scientific Theories* (Minnesota Studies in Philosophy of Science, vol. XIV).

³⁰ Ibid.: 300.

³¹ Kuhn 1990: 301.

in the change of meaning of some terms. Confronted with this shift, there is the problem of truth preservation. According to Kuhn truth values in causal theory depend fully on reference. If an act of baptism or dubbing is an essential determinant of reference and examples from scientific development are resorted in it, Kuhn argues that they are neither consequential nor illuminating.³²

Taking the example from Putnam's argument which is basically rooted in Kripke, that water in twin earth has all the superficial properties as that on earth except that water means XYZ on twin earth, Kuhn points out that there can be possibility of going wrong with our chemical theory. Equation of water with XYZ on twin earth and equation of water with H₂O depend on our chemical theory. But a change in the property of XYZ, let us say not to boil at 100° C, would show the fundamental error in our chemical theory which characterizes both H₂O and XYZ. In such a case a different structured lexicon of chemistry shaped to describe a different sort of world, could well describe the behaviour of XYZ. In such lexicon it may turn out that H₂O might no longer refer to what we now call "water".³³

But Putnam argues that it is the chemical formula and not superficial properties that determine whether a given substance is water, or not. So, water is basically H₂O before 1750 or in 2000. Thus according to causal theory, the concept of water, theory of water and the way samples of water are picked out have not changed. On the other hand, Kuhn illustrates that H₂O picks out samples which are not only water but also ice and steam.³⁴ Therefore, "water" did not pick out in 1750 what is picked out today by H₂O. Liquidity was an essential part of water in 1750 but today it is merely a physical property along with solidity and gaseousness.

According to Kuhn, the so-called superficial properties are not less necessary than those apparently essential. If someone argues that "water" is "liquid H₂O" then it also has other properties necessarily such as capacity to boil and to freeze at certain degrees, and being non-evaporative, etc. These properties are no less necessary than those considered as essential. However, there are many basic-level referring

³² Kuhn 1990: 309.

³³ Ibid.: 310.

³⁴ Ibid.: 311.

terms which have continued through history to refer to the same kind, but there are many who have made a transition. Many terms require small adjustment, but others are both systematic and wide-reaching. Concerning H₂O, the new chemical lexicon, while readjusting the samples used to introduce the basic chemical kinds, placed liquid water in the same category as ice and steam. Thus, dubbing and the process of it not only places an object with its member-kind, but “also locates it with respect to other kinds, placing it not simply within a taxonomic system. Only while that system endures do the names of the kinds it categorizes designate rigidly.”³⁵

Causal-Cognitive Theory of Reference

Kripke finds that the central problem with the descriptivist theory is that proper names are not semantically equivalent to *singular* definite descriptions. Therefore, in order to present a better picture for names and reference-fixing, Kripke adumbrates a causal theory of reference. Thus his aim is to show the superiority of his picture over the descriptivist theory and not to establish truth of this particular theoretical picture. Moreover Kripke “does not refute the descriptivist picture but suggests that reflection on the critical dialogue with descriptivism initiated by his attack leads to what we might think of as a ‘high-level’ intuition that the picture is essentially flawed”.³⁶ Again, for Kripke, “the function of names is *simply* to refer, and not to describe the objects so named . . . ”.³⁷ By bringing these points before the reader I want to suggest that Kripke is more than a pure causal theorist.

The importance of this paper is that it emphasizes cognitive content in causal theory of reference. It would not be proper to discuss here the debatable issue of “what is cognition and its possibility?” rather I would take it for granted that knowledge is possible through learning. It is not merely by dubbing or baptizing a thing as such, that the later users use that name. A new gadget is named laptop, does its new users refer to this object without having any knowledge of it? Kripke and Kuhn both have emphasized on the use of the term in a community.

³⁵ Kuhn 1990: 314-15.

³⁶ Gary Gutting, 2009, *What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 77.

³⁷ Hughes 2004: 1.

But the use of a term is possible only with the language learning as Kuhn suggests. The transfer of a term from its first user to the next users depends on the cognitive element involved in this act. Dubbing or baptizing is an *act* but the use of the term in a specific community is a cognitive process. This process involves learning. As long as this learning is not distorted or improved by new discoveries the use of the original term and the rigid designated terms remain in specific use. I call this theory "causal" because here reference is fixed by an act of baptizing or by description which "is not synonymous with the name it introduces . . .".³⁸ But unlike Kripke the reference is determined by the chain of speakers' knowledge of the referent, and not merely by the blind use of the term once baptized so. Let us say an object is baptized by the term K_0 . S_0 inherits the usage of the term K_0 from P_0 who has baptized it. The transmission of K_0 to S_0 by P_0 involves at least certain cognitive elements T_0 . So, T_0 is a necessary element for the transmission of K_0 . Without T_0 , K_0 would be an empty term failing to refer to anything for S_0 , although it may refer the object for P_0 . But there is no causal link. For an example P_0 dubs an object as *Phone*. S_0 learns the term from P_0 . There is, as I see, no way to learn the term *Phone* except through explanation or ostention. This explanation or ostention is a cognitive process. The success or the failure of the use of the term by other latter users depends on this explanation. Thus the problem of reference change and truth preservation can be explained due to the distortion while transmission, of the cognitive element involved in the first fixing. Thus "Madagascar" of Marco Polo has distortion of the cognitive element used by the natives of Africa.

Again in reply to Kuhn's threat to rigid designation involving natural kind terms as well as theoretical terms, cognitive elements in causal theory of reference tries to provide a satisfactory explanation to the problem. In case of water is H_2O , the new chemical lexicon which arrives due to the progress and the scientific discoveries characterize water as H_2O . It is no more H_2O . But "water" in both the cases remains as "water". Post discovery, water is H_2O , which is a new knowledge and must be passed on to the chain of users through explanation. There is an augmentation of the knowledge concerning water. The rigid designated term "water" thus, may have different explanation now, but the rigid designated term H_2O would always

³⁸ Kripke 1980: 96.

rigidly designate "water". Similar is the case with the theoretical terms in scientific field. A theoretical term T , whose reference is fixed by condition C at a particular period of history, is actually fixed by C_1 in a new scientific time. There is augmentation of the information regarding the theoretical term T . For an example, "Phlogiston" a theoretical term does not exist but the conditions C_s equated it with O_2 . "Oxygen" is another theoretical term which is used and the conditions that fixes its reference with O_2 are improved conditions C_{ss} . But if proper explanation is provided "Phlogiston" would always refer to O_2 . The chain of users would call "Phlogiston" that refers to O_2 . However, now O_2 is referred to as "Oxygen".

There are many problematic issues regarding the concepts used in the paper. Even the term "cognitive" is taken for granted, which I do plead to be given. But my prime objective was to provide a causal-cognitive theory of reference. And to show how this, the so-called a type of "hybrid" causal theory of reference may deal with the problem of reference change, truth preservation and vulnerability of the rigid designator. There have been much debate and criticism to the causal theory of reference, and such philosophical activities have prompted me to go by the Kripkean way while trying to insert at least some cognitive elements in it.

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