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DIVIDED REFERENCE IN CAUSAL THEORIES OF NAMES

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In this paper I pose some difficulties for causal theories of proper names. On such theories, a proper name's referent on a given occasion of use is supposed to be determined by some type of causal chain which connects the referent to the use of the name on that occasion. I will argue that two of the descriptions of purported reference-determining causal chains which have appeared in the literature — one by Kripke, the other by Devitt — yield false theories of name-reference.

Saul Kripke sketches as follows one typical way in which, he says, names get their referents:¹

Someone, let's say, a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain, who has heard about, say Richard Feynman, in the marketplace or elsewhere, may be referring to Richard Feynman even though he can't remember from whom he ever heard of Feynman. He knows that Feynman was a famous physicist. A certain passage reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker. He then is referring to Feynman even though he can't identify him uniquely. (*NN*, pp. 298–299)

Although Kripke does not say it exactly this way, his words suggest the following procedure for finding the referent of a speaker A's use of a name, at least when A has acquired his uses of the name from someone else. First, trace A's use to the point at which A acquired the name by witnessing another speaker B's use of the name; if B's use is derived from someone else's, say C's use of the name, keep tracing to the origin of C's use, and so on. Eventually, if the name has a referent, the chain will end with an initial act in which an object is given the name, and this object is then the referent of A's use of the name. Such chains of communication may of course be quite short or they may be exceedingly long, reaching back thousands of years. In order to avoid certain counterexamples, Kripke also stipulates that each link in a chain of communication determining reference must be reinforced by the intention of the name's receiver to refer to the same individual with the name as does the person from whom he gets the name. (*NN*, p. 302)

One serious difficulty for Kripke's view is raised by a type of case reported by Kripke himself, who in turn heard the example from Gareth Evans:

According to Evans, 'Madagascar' was a native name for a part of Africa; Marco Polo, erroneously thinking that he was following native usage, applied the name to the island. (Evans uses the example to support the description theory; I of course, do not.) Today the usage of the name as a name for an island is so widespread that it surely overrides any historical connection with the native name. (*NN*, p. 768)

The difficulty is that since our uses of 'Madagascar' are traceable to Marco Polo's, and Polo's uses are traceable to those of natives who used the name to refer to a part of mainland Africa, it seems to follow from Kripke's account that our uses of 'Madagascar' must also refer to a part of mainland Africa, and of course they do not. Kripke agrees that this case shows that his original sketch needs modification and he makes a suggestion as to how the modification might proceed:

... the phenomenon is perhaps roughly explicable in terms of the predominantly social character of the use of proper names emphasized in the text [of 'Naming and Necessity']; we use names to communicate with other speakers in a common language. This character dictates ordinarily that a speaker intend to use a name the same way as it was transmitted to him; but in the 'Madagascar' case this social character dictates that the present intention to refer to an island overrides the distant link to native usage. (*NN*, pp. 768–769)

However, I find this suggestion unhelpful. For no appeal to the 'social character' of names, or to peoples' desire to communicate with other speakers, will explain how a shift in reference of 'Madagascar' occurred. Clearly, if the shift occurred with Polo's first uses, these appeals will not work. And if the shift occurred later on, at time *t* say, these appeals will still not work, since at *t* the intention to refer with 'Madagascar' to the same thing to which previous speakers referred (namely, a part of mainland Africa) will be exactly as widespread as the intention to refer to an island with the name. In this case, the desire to communicate cannot alone arbitrate the conflict, since a general resolution in favor of *either* intention would facilitate communication.

Moreover, Kripke's remarks make the unfortunate suggestion that in order for the intention to refer to an island with 'Madagascar' to have overridden this name's causal link to native usage, the intention must have acquired some social prominence. But this is mistaken. Take Marco Polo, for instance. Let us imagine that he returns to Venice from his travels and reports his visit to a huge island off the east coast of Africa, an island that he calls 'Madagascar'. (This story is fiction.) He goes on to describe what he saw of this island in

great detail, often using (we may imagine) the name 'Madagascar' in the sentences which comprise his description. Let us suppose in addition that almost everything Polo says is true of the island he visited, though almost nothing at all of what he says is true of any part of mainland Africa. Subsequently, the news of Polo's discovery spreads throughout Europe, and descriptions of the island he discovered continue to be made by use of the name 'Madagascar'.

Now if the intention to refer with 'Madagascar' to the island Marco Polo visited must be widespread in order for this intention to override the name's causal link to native usage, then we get the following consequences from our story. At the time Polo gave his initial report, the intention to use 'Madagascar' to refer to an island was not at all widespread, but was in fact idiosyncratic to Polo. Thus his tokens of 'Madagascar' referred to a part of the African mainland. Consequently, almost everything Marco Polo reported was false, since almost everything he said, though true of Madagascar, was false of this part of Africa.

Surely, however, this is an incredible view to take of the situation. On this view, Polo's statements made by use of 'Madagascar', as well as the statements made with this name by, say, the first few hundred people to pass on news of Polo's discovery, are all about a part of mainland Africa and consequently, are almost all false. *Eventually* though, when the intentions with which 'Madagascar' is used in Europe are 'widespread enough', the link to a part of Africa is somehow broken, and the originally false sentences used by Polo and others take on a different meaning and become true, even when uttered by Marco Polo himself, and even though no user of 'Madagascar' including Polo is ever aware that this change in meaning took place. But all this is patently absurd.

The truth concerning our story is that the intention to use 'Madagascar' to refer to an island need not have been at all widespread in order for the link to native usage to have been overridden, and that when Polo first returned to Venice, the sentences he uttered containing 'Madagascar' were not about a part of Africa at all. These sentences were about Madagascar. What is needed is a modification of Kripke's view which can take account of this fact.

Michael Devitt has attempted a further development of the causal theory along Kripkean lines.² On Kripke's view of *NN*, the chains which typically determine reference link a use of a name with a baptism in which an object is given a name. On Devitt's view, the chains which typically determine referen-

ce causally link a use of a name *with the object which is the use's referent itself*, either by way of a baptismal ceremony in which the object named bears a causal relation to the ceremony's performance or by way of an initial use of the name whose referent is determined by a causal connection between the referent and the initial use. (ST, p. 199)

On Devitt's view, then, there are roughly *two* types of causal chain which determine reference:

- (I) Chains which link name-uses with their referents via initial baptisms.
- (II) Chains which link name-uses with their referents not via initial baptisms, but via an initial use of the name whose referent is determined by its causal connection with the referent.

(Let us assume that limiting cases of type (II) chains are the perhaps one-segment chains that link some initial uses directly with their referents.)

Devitt's view contains an additional important feature. He claims that "more than one object will usually be appropriately linked to a name token" (ST, p. 200). He describes various cases in which this phenomenon occurs, and then introduces the notion of 'partial designation' to take account of it. A name token may, he says, designate one object *b* to a certain degree *p* and yet another object *c* to a degree *q* (ST, p. 202). Corresponding to the notion of partial designation, Devitt introduces the notion of 'degrees of truth', where a sentence's degree of truth will be a function of the degrees to which its component names designate given objects.

Apparently, then, in order for a name use to *fully* designate an object, there cannot be more than one object linked by an appropriate chain to this use. For instance, if there are two such objects, then the name use will partially designate each object. Also, I gather, it is Devitt's view that if there is just one object linked by an appropriate chain to a given name use, then the use fully designates this object.

Let us see how a theory like Devitt's will handle the 'Madagascar'-case. Suppose that on returning to Venice in 1295, Marco Polo in the course of recounting his travels says

- (1) I visited Madagascar in 1293,

and this is the first time that Polo has used 'Madagascar' to refer to the island

he visited, having previously somehow got the mistaken impression that this was the natives' name for the island. Clearly, Devitt would say that there is a (limiting-case) chain of type (II) linking Polo's use of 'Madagascar' in (1) to the island Madagascar. Thus, the 'Madagascar'-case does not show that Devitt's theory fails to provide the necessary conditions for name reference, for there is a causal chain of an appropriate type (type (II)) linking Polo's use of 'Madagascar' in (1) with its referent. This gives Devitt's theory one advantage over Kripke's original sketch, which only admits chains of type (I).

However, since Polo's use of 'Madagascar' in (1) was linked by appropriate chains to both Madagascar and a part of mainland Africa, we still get the result on Devitt's theory that this use did not refer to Madagascar and that consequently modern uses of the name based on Polo's also do not refer to this island. Perhaps Devitt hoped to make such consequences in cases of this sort seem less anomalous through his notion of partial designation. True enough, it is an additional consequence of his view that in our story Polo's and present day uses of 'Madagascar' do at least *partially* (perhaps *mostly*) designate the island. However, in order to accept this, we must also accept that Polo's utterance of (1) was only partly true, and that present day speakers of, say

- (2) Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world

are saying something partly (even if only slightly) false. Perhaps some might find these consequences difficult to accept. I myself do not know quite what to make of them.

But whether or not one agrees that the notion of partial designation takes care of the problem of conflicting causal chains in the 'Madagascar'-case, there are other cases which show conclusively that appeal to partial designation cannot always adequately resolve conflicts in chains that, according to Devitt, are reference-determining. These are cases of misidentification. Devitt himself describes such a case, in which he (Devitt) uses 'Nana', a name he has given his cat:

Suppose for example my statement (ii) "This is Nana" is *false*; it is actually Jemima. (I am mistaken, or perhaps I am lying). Any 'ability' gained as a result will be grounded in Nana via my use of her name, and in Jemima via the demonstrative... In a sense, the speaker has *both* cats in mind in using the name. What is designated by that use and hence will be designated by someone who uses the name as a result of it? (ST, p. 200, Devitt's italics)

Devitt then goes on to answer his question regarding this case and others by use of his notion of partial designation. Thus his view must be that in (ii) “This is Nana”, ‘Nana’ partially designates Jemima and partially designates Nana. Devitt is clearly committed to this view by his espousal of the following principle:

- (3) For any x , y , and z , x had y in mind in uttering a token of the name type z (x meant y in uttering a token of the name type z) if and only if x had an ability to designate y by z and that ability was exercised in the production of that token of z .

((3) is a direct quote from *ST*, p. 189; Devitt intends (3) as an analysis of *having an object in mind in using a name*.) In Devitt’s example, the speaker of “This is Nana”, if we assume he is mistaken and not lying, intends to refer to Jemima with ‘Nana’, since he intends to refer to the cat he sees with ‘Nana’, and this cat is in fact Jemima. Of course the speaker also intends to refer to Nana with ‘Nana’. (The singular terms in these ‘intending’-contexts are to be construed as having large scope.) Thus, as Devitt says, the speaker has both Jemima and Nana in mind in uttering his token of ‘Nana’, and so by (3), he is exercising both his ability to designate Jemima by ‘Nana’ and his ability to designate Nana by ‘Nana’. Now Devitt clearly believes that when a speaker exercises two distinct abilities to designate two distinct objects with a name in the production of a single token of that name, then that token partially designates each of the two objects. Consequently, he is committed to holding that the token of ‘Nana’ uttered by the mistaken speaker of “This is Nana” partially designates Nana and partially designates Jemima.

But this last consequence of Devitt’s view is false of his example. For Devitt’s case is supposed to be a case of *mistaken* identity. As Devitt himself says, the speaker’s use of “This is Nana” is *false*; it is not partly true and partly false. Perhaps Devitt would say that when he was setting up his example and said that “‘This is Nana’ is *false*” he did not intend to be taken literally, and that in accordance with his notion of partial designation, he would qualify his statement to: “‘This is Nana’ though partly true, is *mostly false*.” But it seems to me that if he were to say this, he would just be wrong.

In any case, we can easily see that at least one of Devitt’s beliefs which leads to the conclusion that the token of ‘Nana’ in “This is Nana” partially designates each of two objects, must be false. For if all these beliefs were

true, we could infer the absurdity that *in general*, where α and β are any designating names or demonstratives, no use of $\lceil \alpha \text{ is } \beta \rceil$ is ever completely false. For instance, we could infer that those who have espoused the view that Shakespeare was Bacon must have been at least partially correct. This would follow because those who say "Shakespeare was Bacon" typically intend to refer to both Shakespeare and Bacon with the tokens of both names. By Devitt's reasoning, based on his principle (3), these tokens of 'Shakespeare' and 'Bacon' each partially designates both Shakespeare and Bacon, making the tokens of "Shakespeare was Bacon" in which they occur at least partly true. But this is patently absurd. Surely there have in fact been many sentence-utterances of the form $\lceil \alpha \text{ is } \beta \rceil$, where α and β are designating names or demonstratives, that have been simply and wholly false: utterances of "Shakespeare was Bacon" provide a case in point.

Devitt is led to hold a false view because he propounds the false principle (3). (3) is false simply because one can have an object in mind in using a name, without (even partially) designating that object with the name, and hence without at all "exercising one's ability" to designate that object with the name.

Devitt accepts (3) partly because of his assumption that "in general, one has an object in mind in virtue of a causal connection between one's state of mind and the object." (*ST*, p. 188) Apparently, this idea suggested to him that if a person x has an object y in mind using a name-token α at time t , then there is some causal connection between y and x 's state of mind at t , and *this connection provides a causal chain that determines the referent of α* . But the latter is a false assumption, since whatever causal chain connected Jemima with the state of mind of the speaker of "This is Nana", this chain did not determine the referent of this use of 'Nana'. Hence there are causal chains which Devitt's theory counts as reference-determining but that actually do not play any role in determining reference.

Donnellan has proposed a view of names which is similar to causal theories, and which is apparently false, for the same reason that (3) is false. He sums up his view as follows:

The main idea is that when a speaker uses a name intending to refer to an individual and predicate something of it, successful reference will occur when there is an individual that enters into the historically correct explanation of who it is that the speaker intended to predicate something of. That individual will then be the referent and the statement made will be true or false depending on whether it has the property designated by the predicate.³

Apparently, Donnellan means that the individual that enters into the historically correct explanation of who it is that the speaker intended to predicate something of, will also *be* the individual of whom the speaker intended to predicate something, that is, will be the individual to whom the speaker intended to refer with the name. If this interpretation is correct, then Donnellan's stated view is false, since, as we have seen, there will sometimes be two distinct individuals to which a speaker intends to refer with a name though only one of them is the name's referent.

What is required to rehabilitate theories of the sort I have discussed is some method of clearly distinguishing, among all the types of causal chains which may be involved in a single use of a name, those chains which do and those which do not play a role in determining reference. Until this is done, the suggestive idea that the referents of proper names are determined by causal chains of communication remains only a suggestion, and we really have no good reason to suppose that this suggestion even *resembles* the true account.

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NOTES

¹ 'Naming and Necessity' and 'Addenda', in D. Davidson and G. Harmon, (eds.), *Semantics of Natural Language*, (Dordrecht, Reidel, 1972), pp. 253–355, 763–769. Henceforth referred to as *NN*.

² 'Singular Terms', *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXI, 7 (April 18, 1974), pp. 183–205. Henceforth referred to as *ST*.

³ 'Speaking of Nothing', *The Philosophical Review* LXXXIII, No. 1 (January, 1974), p. 16.