Philosophy of Language // Spring 2017

Handout 7

Critique of Kripke: Dummett, Bach, Sainsbury

Knowledge of truth and knowledge of propositions. Suppose there is a sentence that the speakers of the language containing it recognise as true. A very good example would be a mathematical sentence. If a child merely knows that:

$$\sin^2 x + \cos^2 x = 1 \tag{7-1}$$

is true, he knows nothing more that this sentence is accepted by competent users of the mathematical discourse (for example, that it occurs in a list of true mathematical sentences provided by an authoritative textbook).

Yet clearly this piece of knowledge is not enough for the child to know the proposition expressed by (7-1), the thought associated with it. What it takes for the child to know the *proposition* (7-1) is the knowledge of the occasion where the competent users would consent or dissent from the utterance of (7-1), or the knowledge of the kind of inferences one can make from (7-1). To know something is the case is to possess non-trivial competences that would not otherwise be available. Knowledge of the sentence's truth does not provide on with such competences. 135

Names and competence. The distinction between two kind of knowledge can be applied to the case of proper names. If someone overhears a scrap of conversation where the name 'Lenin' is used, or even if someone is directly told that Lenin is dead, one does not thereby acquire a competence allowing one to use the name 'Lenin'. The causal theory of reference blurs the distinction between two kinds of knowledge. But what exactly is the difference between knowing that the name 'Lenin' refers to Lenin, and merely knowing that the name 'Lenin' refers to someone called 'Lenin'? Someone merely in possession of the second kind of knowledge (analogous to the knowledge that a sentence is true), in speaking about Lenin, should always have to revert to the source that supplied him with the name 'Lenin', in order to find out who the name refers to. But if one is competent with the use of the name, then the source is irrelevant. 140 141 142

Hence a distinction can be drawn between names whose use depends on a single source and names not so dependent (as the case normally is). One can use the name 'Lenin' and associate only one property F with Lenin (e.g., being the founder of the Soviet Union'). One can allow that F could turn out not to be the founder of the Soviet Union—but only because one also assumes there can be other ways of identifying the bearer of 'Lenin', even if they are presently unknown. 142 bottom

The case seems different with a name 'Goliath'. This example seems to undermine Kripke's epistemic and semantic arguments. For us, the only source of the name is a story in the Bible where Goliath is a Philistine giant warrior killed by David. Suppose that the name 'Goliath' referred to a Philistine who never fought David. Suppose a relevant evidence to this effect has been uncovered. Should we say, with Kripke: 143

> Ah, so Goliath did not fight David! (7-2)

It is not clear that we should withdraw any of our previous claims about Goliath. Our use of the name is fixed by its tradition of use. And the tradition presumably is still intact, even upon the discovery: it meant to refer to the person who fought David, and through some accident it got the name wrong. 141

It is, I think, an important idea advanced by Dummett here, that the causal theory of names does not allocate any role to the semantic competence in the use of names, and that it makes our ability to refer to individuals implausibly easy. Yet, as far as 'Goliath' is concerned, Kripke has a way out. It may be that, on our lips, the name 'Goliath' refers to whoever performed the deed attributed to 'Goliath' in the Bible. Thus the name is a descriptive name analogous to 'Jack the Ripper'. This is no objection to the causal theory, as long as it allows such exceptions (and Kripke explicitle recognises them).

Question 1. Paraphrase the problem created by 'Goliath' in terms of the earlier discussion of the name 'Thales'.

Remark 2. As far as I can see, Dummett made a slip. The example of Goliath was first introduced by Evans, rather than Kripke.

Problems with rigid designators. These problems are straightforward consequences of the preceding discussion of Frege and Kripke. As soon as Kripke has abandoned the sense/reference distinction for proper names, his view can no longer enjoy the benefits of that distinction that motivated it in the first place. In particular, it cannot profit from the idea that speakers can form different epistemic attitudes toward sentences containing different names with the same references. We are following Bach's presentation here.

Vacuous names. If a name fails to designate anything, then Kripke's account of it is in trouble. For according to Kripke's view, the contribution of the name to the proposition expressed is the individual it designates. Hence, such a proposition, e.g.:

> Odysseus lived in Ithaca, (7-3)

is not false, but meaningless. The original Mill's view seems to fare even worse, because on that view, no name has any meaning.

Existence statements. Here we consider sentences of the kind:

> Lenin exists. (7-4)

Unless a further analysis is given (as in Russell's theory of descriptions), they should be represented as:

$$\exists x(x = a), \tag{7-5}$$

where the individual constant 'a' stands for Lenin. Now if (7-4) is meaningful, then it is true. And if it is false, then it is meaningless. Hence, in these properties it resembles a tautology. Yet obviously it is not a tautology.

Question 3. Explain why (7-4) resembles a tautology by giving an example.

Another (related) problem is with negative existentials:

> Odysseus does not exist. (7-6)

This sentence should come out true, if Homer's epic is fiction. But not so on Kripke's view, because then it should be meaningless (by the argument above).

Informative identities. As in the classical problem of Frege's, we compare the sentences:

> Lenin is Lenin (7-7)

and:

> Lenin is the founder of the Soviet Union. (7-8)

Once the contribution of the name to the semantic meaning of the sentence is the individual itself, we are unable to explain the meaning difference between the two sentences.

Belief contexts. We imagine that someone has come to know facts about a person called 'NN' in different circumstances, but is unable to infer that the person spoken about under those circumstances is the same person.

So if I come to learn that Lenin is a philosophical writer (a Mach's critic, for instance), I may conclude that Lenin is not a politician. But then I learn that Lenin is the founder of the Soviet Union, and thereupon conclude that Lenin is a politician. So I end up believing that Lenin is a politician and Lenin is not a politician. However, this is not how we would like to describe the case. We do not want to say that I hold contradictory beliefs.

Frege's explanation was tailored to account for this problem. I associate different senses with the name 'Lenin' on the two occasions. Alternatively, we could say that I have not fully grasped the sense of 'Lenin', hence my ignorance. Kripke robbed himself of this solution, but does not offer much in exchange.

A NEO-RUSSELLIAN RESPONSE. Kripke presents Russell as advocating the view that each proper name possesses a class of descriptions which determines its reference. But it is never certain what sort of theory Kripke has in mind when he talks about the Frege-Russell view. Thus, in one place he pictures Frege and Russell as adherents of a many-descriptions theory, according to which each name is a disguised form of many or all descriptions that the speaker associates with the referent. The textual evidence may be found in 134–135 where Kripke contrasts the Frege-Russell with the cluster view. The peculiarity of the latter view lies in that 'only *enough*' number of descriptions needs to apply. However, in page 31 cluster view is interpreted as claiming (and improving on Frege-Russell) that

> we can't substitute a *particular* description for the name… What we really associate with the name is a *family* of descriptions (his italics).

It follows that the Frege-Russell is not entitled to the claim that the speaker should associate the whole range of descriptions, but only that he should be able to replace the name by one such description. This is what Kripke says in page 30.

Perhaps, these exegetical ambiguities are of little or none value, since Kripke consciously does not offer a properly historical interpretation of either Frege or Russell. It has been stated many times since that he misinterpreted all four major figures whom he attacked, and of course his book is not a source or reference in the philosophy of Russell. But there is a need for clarification of the name-description relation. This gap is filled in by Sainsbury.

Sainsbury classifies description theories according to their relation to names, descriptions and occasions. The strongest theory holds that there is a single (unique) description for all speakers and occasions that relates name to the description for the given speaker on the given occasion. The weakest theory holds that for all speakers and all occasions there is *a* description that satisfies such relation. Sainsbury claims that Kripke never addresses the weakest kind of description theories. Further, the name-description relation may be of three types: fixing meaning, fixing reference and fixing speaker's thought. Evidently, the third type equally escaped Kripke's attention. Sainsbury's exegetical claim, then, is that Russell adhered to the weakest thought-fixation theory.

This seems to be confirmed by Russell's own words:

> Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions. That is to say, the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description. Moreover, the description required to express the thought will vary for different people, or for the same person at different times. The only thing constant (so long as the name is rightly used) is the object to which the name applies. But so long as this remains constant, the particular description involved usually makes no difference to the truth or falsehood of the proposition in which the name appears.
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> What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that however we may vary the description (so long as the description is correct) the proposition described is still the same. This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us; but we are not acquainted with the proposition itself, and do not know it, though we know it is true.

Russell's claim, then, relates to the possibility of thinking about an object. We cannot think about an object without attributing a property to him. That is the role of descriptions. Secondly—and here the peculiar Russell's metaphysics is displayed in full glory—our success at communication owes to our awareness of the shared proposition that we describe. Although we will not discuss the issue further, it should be clear that the semantic role of descriptions cannot be disentangled from their metaphysical role.