Handout 9

Causal theory of reference: Kripke; Dummett's critique

PRELIMINARIES. After criticising descriptivism Kripke proposes an alternative way of thinking about reference of proper names. He states his theory briefly and with hesitation, complaining about the possibility of it being false. Despite those caveats it is worth discussing it in detail, especially in the light of the ensuing debate. We call his view 'the causal theory of reference'. Several people vigorously opposed the mention of causality in this label. We shall, however, stick to it, whilst trying to clarify the precise role of causal relations.

BAPTISM AND TRANSMISSION. The account splits into: the account of the initial *baptism* and the account of the *transmission* of the name down the causal chain of name-users. Baptism involves descriptions. The name is attached to the object by a description interpreted in a wide sense: it may include verbal descriptions and demonstratives accompanied by ostension. We may have baptisms like:

> Let this child [in front of me] be called 'Isaac'   (9-1)

or:

> The man previously called 'Jacob' will now be called 'Israel'.   (9-2)

Gen. 32:28

Baptism itself need not require causal contact of any kind. We may baptise causally inert mathematical objects, such as the number π. Another feature: the description need not be associated permanently with the name. It neither gives the meaning of the name, nor does it serve to determine the name's reference (see the earlier discussion of meaning fixation and reference fixation). It may subsequently be forgotten or misstated. Perhaps what we should add is that there must be an intention of using the name for the same object as before.

The same restriction applies to the use of the name by later users, those people who received the name from the baptiser(s). But the intention to use the name in the same mode must be understood in a very weak sense. It should not even be conscious. Perhaps a better way would be to say that there must be *no* intention of using the name to refer to a different object.

Later users must also recognise the expression 'NN' as belonging syntactically to the category of names. Again, although the introduction of the name into their idiolect may be accompanied by a description, this description need not be true or accurate. I may hear the name 'Stalin' from someone who told me:

> Stalin was the best friend of Soviet children.   (9-3)

This is not a true statement (he was their worst friend). Yet I may subsequently use the name 'Stalin' to refer to Stalin, even though my information about him is inadequate.

DIRECT REFERENCE. Kripke is sometimes believed to have adopted the so-called 'direct reference view'. On this view, sentences that differ only by the substitution of one name by another name for the same object express the same proposition. If we add a plausible assumption that belief and knowledge are relations between persons and propositions, we may get implausible consequences.

Suppose the speaker knows that Stalin died in 1953. Since Stalin is Dzhugashvili, the proposition:

> Stalin died in 1953   (9-4)

should be the same as:

> Dzhugashvili died in 1953.   (9-5)

Thus, on the direct reference account, our speaker should know the second proposition as well. And this is obviously not true of many speakers.

Question 1. Why should the speaker, who knows the proposition (9-4), should also know (9-5)?

On Kripke's causal view, there is no mystery. The two names, 'Stalin' and 'Dzhugashvili', are connected to the speaker through two different chains. If the speaker has been presented with the expression 'Dzhugashvili' and has recognised it as a proper name, then he is able to refer to Dzhugashvili. But the chain connecting him to Dzhugashvili (or to the first use of the name 'Dzhugashvili') is not the same as the chain connecting him to Stalin (or to the first use of the name 'Stalin').

Therefore, there is no *direct* reference, according to Kripke. Referring is still mediated by causal chains. Notice, however, that, although such a view provides a reference-fixing mechanism, it remains neutral on the issue of the meaning of proper names. Yet it seems as though we have to have *some* theory of meaning here: we have to explain how the meaning of 'Stalin' contributes to the meaning of the sentences (propositions) where it occurs.

DUMMETT: KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE OF PROPOSITIONS.

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

$$\sin^2 x + \cos^2 x = 1 \tag{9-6}$$

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 (9-6), the thought associated with it. What it takes for the child to know the *proposition* (9-6) is the knowledge of the occasion where the competent users would consent or dissent from the utterance of (9-6), or the knowledge of the kind of inferences one can make from (9-6). 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.

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.

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.

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:

Ah, so Goliath did not fight David! (9-7)

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.

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

Remark 3. As far as I can see, Dummett made a slip. The example of Goliath was first introduced by Evans, rather than Kripke.

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