

Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*

Lecture Two

Descriptivism

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Descriptivism

Millianism

Frege and Russell

Descriptivism

Introduction

- Kripke's plan in *N&N* is to present some new ideas about how names work, and use those new ideas to argue for some startling metaphysical conclusions
- A great deal of Lectures One and Two are spent arguing against the theory of how names work that was dominant in the 70s
- Kripke called that view the “Frege-Russell Theory”, but as we will see, that name is misleading; we will call it **descriptivism** instead
- The aim of today's lecture is to explain what descriptivism is, and where it came from

Why are we Talking about Names???

- Some of you may be surprised by the content of this lecture (and the next two!)
- This is a **metaphysics** lecture. We should be talking about the big metaphysical questions, not fussing about how names work!
- Kripke thinks that figuring out how names work is the key to unlocking lots of important metaphysical conclusions
- This sort of approach to metaphysics is very common in analytic philosophy

Proper Names

- In these lectures, we are going to be talking a lot about **names**. But which expressions count as names?
- In these lectures, we are going to focus mainly on ordinary proper names, like 'Aristotle', 'Ludwig Wittgenstein' and 'Donald Trump'
- Philosophers often count lots of other expressions as "names" too, but we will not worry too much about them
- For the record: this was Kripke's policy too (*N&N*: 24)

What do Names do?

- Consider the name 'Donald Trump'. What does this name do?
- Well, it picks a person out, or in philosophical lingo: it **refers** to a person
 - 'Donald Trump' refers to Donald Trump
- When we use the name 'Donald Trump' in a sentence, we say something about Donald Trump
 - When we say 'Donald Trump is the President of America', we are saying something about Donald Trump, namely that he is the President of America

Introducing Millianism

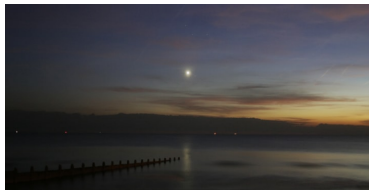
- So, names **refer** to things. Do they do anything else?
- It is very tempting to say No: names refer to things, and that is all that they do
 - Names are sort of like tags which just let us pick out the person they refer to
 - Names are sort of like arrows which just point at the person they refer to
- This view of names is often called **Millianism**, because it was argued for by John Stuart Mill

Millianism and Meaning

- According to Millianism: names have no meaning, above and beyond the fact that they refer to particular things
 - (1) If two names refer to the same thing, then they mean the same thing
 - (2) If a name does not refer to anything, then it does not mean anything
- Millianism is a very attractive theory of how names work, at least initially
- Unfortunately, it runs into all sorts of trouble

Problem 1: Co-Referring Names

- In the ancient world, astronomers called the brightest star in the evening sky 'Hesperus', and the brightest star in the morning sky 'Phosphorus'
- Ancient Babylonian astronomers discovered that Hesperus and Phosphorus were one and the same star
- And today we know that really, Hesperus/Phosphorus isn't a star at all: it is the planet Venus



Problem 1: Co-Referring Names

- Now consider these two sentences:
 - (1) Hesperus = Hesperus
 - (2) Hesperus = Phosphorus
- (1) and (2) are both true, but there is an important difference between them:
 - (1) is obviously true, and completely uninformative
 - (2) wasn't obviously true, and expresses a substantial discovery
- But Millianism doesn't seem to leave room for this difference between (1) and (2):
 - 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' co-refer, and so according to Millianism, they mean the same thing
 - Surely that implies that (1) and (2) mean the same thing?

Problem 2: Empty Names

- In the 19th Century, a French mathematician called Urbain Le Verrier noticed that Mercury wasn't orbiting the Sun in the way that Newton's theory of gravity said it should
- He argued that this was because there was another planet in between the Sun and Mercury, and that planet was disturbing the orbit of Mercury, which he called 'Vulcan'
- We now know that there is no such planet: Vulcan does not exist



Problem 2: Empty Names

- The name 'Vulcan' doesn't refer to anything
- According to Millianism, names which do not refer to anything do not mean anything
- But this seems wrong: 'Vulcan' seems like a perfectly meaningful name, albeit a name which does not refer to anything
- Lots of astronomers believed Vulcan existed, and said things like: 'Vulcan will be passing between us and the Sun tomorrow'
- Moreover, even those astronomers who knew that Vulcan did not exist were happy to use the name 'Vulcan': they said things like, 'Vulcan does not exist'

Problem 2: Empty Names

- The fact that people seemed to be able to use 'Vulcan' in meaningful sentences very much suggests that 'Vulcan' is a meaningful name
 - Surely you cannot use a *meaningless* name in a *meaningful* sentence?
- But if 'Vulcan' is meaningful, then that must mean that Millianism is wrong: a name can be meaningful even if it does not refer to anything

Against Millianism

- According to Millianism: names have no meaning, above and beyond the fact that they refer to particular things
 - (1) If two names refer to the same thing, then they mean the same thing
 - (2) If a name does not refer to anything, then it does not mean anything
- There seem to be counterexamples to (1) and (2):
 - 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' refer to the same thing, yet mean different things
 - 'Vulcan' does not refer to anything, yet it does seem to mean something

Descriptivism

Millianism

Frege and Russell

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Frege's Sense/Reference Distinction

- Gottlob Frege was one of the most famous philosophers to argue against Millianism
- Frege argued that there was more to the meaning of a name than the thing it refers to
- According to Frege, names have a **sense**, as well as a reference
- If you are interested, Frege gave his arguments in 'On Sense and Reference'



Gottlob Frege

Solving the Problems for Millianism

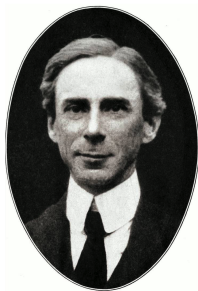
- According to Frege, 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have different senses, even though they refer to the same thing
- That is why these sentences are different:
 - (1) Hesperus = Hesperus
 - (2) Hesperus = Phosphorus
- (2) is informative because we have used two names for Venus which have different senses
- According to Frege, 'Vulcan' has a sense, even though it doesn't refer to anything
- That is why we can use 'Vulcan' in meaningful sentences, like: 'Vulcan does not exist'

What is the Sense of a Name?

- Frege seems to have an easy way of dealing with the problems for Millianism, but before we can say whether they are any good, we need to know more about what the sense of a name actually is
- Unfortunately, Frege does not have much to say about that
- What Frege does tell us is that the sense of a name is the way that the name picks its referent out
 - The idea is that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' both pick out Venus, but they pick Venus out in different ways
- But that is about as clear as Frege ever gets about what the sense of a name is

Russell's Reaction to Frege

- Russell thought that Frege's distinction between sense and reference was mysterious
- In a paper called 'On Denoting', Russell offered a new theory of how proper names worked
- This theory was meant to avoid the problems of Millianism without introducing anything like Frege's sense/reference distinction



Bertrand Russell

Definite Descriptions

- A **definite description** is an expression of the form 'the *F*'
 - The author of *Harry Potter*
 - The current President of America
- A definite description is meant to pick out the one and only thing which satisfies the description
 - 'The author of *Harry Potter*' picks out J.K. Rowling because she is the one and only person who wrote *Harry Potter*
- If no one satisfies a definite description, or more than one person does, then the definite description does not pick anyone out
 - 'The current King of France' does not pick out anyone, because no one is currently a king of France
 - 'The student in this lecture hall' does not pick anyone out, because there is more than one student in this lecture hall

Names as Definite Descriptions in Disguise

- According to Russell, an ordinary proper names is an abbreviation for a definite description which uniquely describe the thing the name is meant to refer to
 - 'Hesperus' is an abbreviation for 'the brightest object in the evening sky'
 - 'Phosphorus' is an abbreviation for 'the brightest object in the morning sky'
 - 'Vulcan' is an abbreviation for 'the planet which is responsible for making Mercury's orbit deviate from the path predicted by Newton'
 - 'Plato' might be an abbreviation for 'the student of Socrates who wrote *The Republic*'
 - 'Aristotle' might be an abbreviation for 'the student of Plato who taught Alexander the Great'

Solving the Problems for Millianism

- If Russell is right, then we can start to see why one of these sentences is more informative than the other:
 - (1) Hesperus = Hesperus
 - (2) Hesperus = Phosphorus
- 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are abbreviations for 'the brightest object in the evening sky' and 'the brightest object in the morning sky'
- These definite descriptions pick out the same object, but they describe it in completely different ways
- The difference between (1) and (2) is the difference between:
 - (1') The brightest object in the evening sky = the brightest object in the evening sky
 - (2') The brightest object in the evening sky = the brightest object in the morning sky

Solving the Problems for Millianism

- We can also begin to see why 'Vulcan' can be meaningful even though it doesn't refer to anything
- 'Vulcan' is an abbreviation for the following description: 'the planet which is responsible for making Mercury's orbit deviate from the path predicted by Newton'
- Nothing satisfies that description, but we can surely understand what it means!

How do Definite Descriptions Work?

- Russell seems to have an easy way of dealing with the problems for Millianism, but before we can say whether they are any good, we need to know more about how definite descriptions actually work
- In particular, it is important that we do not apply Millianism to definite descriptions!
 - Two definite descriptions can mean different things **even if** they pick out the same thing
 - A definite description can be meaningful **even if** it does not pick anything out

Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions

- Russell actually had a very well worked out theory of definite descriptions
- According to Russell, we can always **eliminate** a definite description using quantifiers
- When we say something of the form 'The F is G ', we are really asserting the following conjunction:

At least one thing is F ,
and at most one thing is F ,
and anything which is F is G

- For example, 'The author of *Harry Potter* is very wealthy' becomes:

At least one person authored *Harry Potter*,
and at most one person authored *Harry Potter*,
and anyone who authored *Harry Potter* is very wealthy

The Key Things to Remember

- Luckily, we do **not** need to worry too much about the details of Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions in this module
- For now, the **KEY THINGS** to remember about definite descriptions are:
 - (i) Definite descriptions are expressions of the form 'the F '
 - (ii) If exactly one thing is F , then 'the F ' picks out that thing
 - (iii) If it is not the case that exactly one thing is F , then 'the F ' doesn't pick out anything
 - (iv) Two definite descriptions can mean different things even if they pick out the same thing
 - (v) A definite description can be meaningful even if it does not pick anything out

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The Frege-Russell Theory of Names

- Kripke spends most of Lectures One and Two of *N&N* arguing against a view of names he calls the “Frege-Russell Theory”
- According to the “Frege-Russell Theory”: every proper name is synonymous with (i.e. means the same thing as) some definite description
 - ‘Hesperus’ is synonymous with ‘the brightest star in the night sky’
 - ‘Vulcan’ is synonymous with ‘the planet responsible for making Mercury deviate from its Newtonian orbit’
 - ‘Aristotle’ is synonymous with ‘the student of Plato who taught Alexander the Great’

The Frege-Russell Theory???

- It is easy to see the *Russell* in this Frege-Russell theory
 - If every proper name is an abbreviation for some definite description, then every proper name is synonymous with some definite description
- But where is the *Frege*?
- Kripke thinks that for Frege, the sense of a proper name is a description associated with that name
 - ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ pick out Venus in different ways because they are associated with different descriptions, they have different “descriptive contents”
- This way of interpreting Frege was very common, especially amongst American philosophers in the 70s, but there is very little evidence to support it

A Better Name: Descriptivism

- Since it gets Frege wrong, we will not call the theory Kripke opposes the “Frege-Russell” theory
- We will give it a much more transparent name: **Descriptivism**
- Here is an initial statement of what descriptivism is
 - **Descriptivism:** every proper name is synonymous with some definite description
- That is the basic idea behind descriptivism, but there are a couple of further complications that I should quickly mention

Understanding a Name

- According to Kripke, there is a little bit more to descriptivism than the idea that every proper name is synonymous with a definite description
- Descriptivism *also* tells us that everyone who **understands** a name **knows** which definite description it is synonymous with
 - For example, anyone who understands 'Hesperus' must know that it is synonymous with 'the brightest object in the evening sky'
- As Kripke points out, this means that most of the time, we probably all mean different things even when we use the same name
 - There is a good chance that different people will pick different definite descriptions to be synonymous with their use of 'Donald Trump'

A Cluster of Descriptions

- Descriptivism was **very popular** before Kripke, but lots of philosophers thought it was a little bit too restrictive to say that every proper name was synonymous with **one** definite description
- Instead, some philosophers (e.g. Searle in 'Proper Names') said that names are really associated with a **cluster** of descriptions

A Cluster of Descriptions

- For example, 'Aristotle' might be associated with:
 - The most famous student of Plato
 - The most famous teacher of Alexander the Great
 - The author of *Nicomachean Ethics*
- According to Searle, if someone satisfies enough of these descriptions, then 'Aristotle' refers to that thing
- We can make things even more sophisticated by saying that some descriptions are more important than others

The Key Thing to Remember

- The cluster-version of descriptivism is much more plausible than the simpler version, which says each proper name is synonymous with **one** description
- However, to keep things simple, we will focus on the simpler version of descriptivism
- So these are the **KEY THINGS** to remember about descriptivism:
 - (i) Every proper name is synonymous with some definite description
 - (ii) Anyone who understands a proper name knows the description it is synonymous with
- Kripke thought that descriptivism was dead wrong, and we will see why next week

Seminars

- The reading for this week's seminar is Lecture One of *N&N*
- I have also posted some questions on the VLE: you need to bring short **written** answers to those questions to the seminars
- The reading for next week's lectures and seminar is Lecture Two of *N&N*