

Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*
Lecture Four

The Causal Picture of Reference

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The Causal Picture of Reference

Introduction

The Links in a Causal Chain

Initial Baptisms

The Madagascar Problem

Summary

Last Lecture: Objections to Descriptivism

- In the last lecture, we looked at Kripke's objections to descriptivism
- Descriptivism makes two claims:
 - (i) Every proper name is synonymous with some definite description
 - (ii) Anyone who understands a proper name knows the definite description it is synonymous with
- Kripke presented three arguments against descriptivism:
 - The Modal Argument
 - The Semantic Argument
 - The Epistemic Argument
- The Modal and Semantic Arguments focussed on (i); the Epistemic Argument focussed on (ii)

This Lecture: The Causal Picture of Reference

- In this lecture, we are going to outline the picture of reference that Kripke prefers to descriptivism
- Causation plays a very large role in this picture, and so I will call it the **Causal Picture of Reference**
- I am being careful not to call it a *theory*, because Kripke (*N&N*: 93) was clear that he did not mean to present a fully fledged theory of reference
- When criticising descriptivism, Kripke remarked:

It really is a nice theory. The only defect I think it has is probably common to all philosophical theories. It's wrong. You may suspect me of proposing another theory in its place; but I hope not, because I'm sure it's wrong too if it is a theory. (N&N: 64)

Why Are We *Still* Doing This???

- At this point some of you might be getting itchy feet
- **When are we going to stop doing all this stuff about names, and start doing some metaphysics???**
- This is the last lecture focussing on names; next week we will start looking at the metaphysics of *N&N*
- The reason we have had to spend so long on names is that Kripke thinks his metaphysical conclusions flow from his new picture of naming
- As I've said, this is a common way of approaching metaphysics in analytic philosophy, and whether you think it is a good way or a bad one, it is important to see it at work

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What Next, After Descriptivism?

- Let's grant for the sake of argument that Kripke has refuted descriptivism:
 - In general, proper names are **not** synonymous with definite descriptions
 - When you use the name 'Donald Trump', you refer to a particular man, but **not** because you have in mind some description which he and he alone satisfies
- But if descriptivism is not the right theory of how names work, then how do they work?
- Why is it that when you use 'Donald Trump', you refer to the particular person you refer to?

Sketching the Causal Picture

- One day a child was born, and his parents named him 'Donald Trump'
- Those parents introduced that baby to lots of people, and told them that he was called 'Donald Trump'
- Those people started using that name to refer to that child, and other people picked the name up from them
- And thus more people started using that name to refer to that person, and thereby passing that name on to the people who heard it

Sketching the Causal Picture

- After a few decades, this chain of people passing the name on reached you, and you picked up on using the name 'Donald Trump'
- The reason that you now refer to Donald Trump when you use 'Donald Trump' is that there is a long chain of communication, passing the name from one person to another; you are at one end of that chain, and at the other is Donald Trump's parents, naming him 'Donald Trump'

Sketching the Causal Picture

- Speaking more generally, this is the **KEY IDEA** behind Kripke's picture of reference (*N&N*: 90–7):
 - One day someone names (or *baptises*) a person or object 'NN'
 - As a result, people start using the name 'NN' to refer to that person/object, and thereby transmit it to more and more people
 - The reason that you now refer to that person/object when you use 'NN' is that there is a chain of communication passing that name from person to person, with you at one end and the initial baptism at the other

Two Questions

- That is the sketch, to fill it in we need to know more about two details:
 - (i) What happens at the initial baptism?
 - (ii) How exactly do the links in a chain of communication pass the use of a name on?
- In this part of the lecture we will look at question (ii), and we'll look at question (i) in the next part

Causal Chains

- The first thing to stress is that chains of communication are **causal chains** (*N&N*: 93)
- You acquire the use of a name (in part) by *hearing* other people say it, or *seeing* them write it, or whatever
- More generally, it takes a **causal** interaction with someone else for them to transmit their use of a name to you
 - You picked up on the name 'Donald Trump' (in part) by **causally interacting** in some way with people who were using the name
- Hence this picture is called the **Causal Picture of Reference**

Reference Despite Ignorance

- The next thing I want to mention is that on the Causal Picture, it does not take much for you to acquire the use of a name
- According to descriptivism, you cannot use a name to refer to someone unless you know some description which they uniquely satisfy
- But on the Causal Picture, all you need to do to refer to someone is acquire the use of their name from someone else

Reference Despite Ignorance

- Richard Feynman was a very famous physicist in the 20th Century, but most of us do not know enough about him to distinguish him from all of the other famous physicists from the 20th Century
- As a result, according to descriptivism, we cannot really refer to Richard Feynman
- To refer to Richard Feynman, we need to understand some name which referred to him
- But according to descriptivism, we cannot understand a name unless we know which definite description it is synonymous with
- But I do not know any definite description which picks Feynman out, rather than, say, Murray Gell-Mann

Reference Despite Ignorance

- But on the Causal Picture, we can refer to Richard Feynman:
 - Richard Feynman was named 'Richard Feynman' by his parents
 - That name got passed down from person to person, and eventually reached us
 - So now when we use the name 'Richard Feynman', we refer to Richard Feynman
- On this front, the Causal Picture looks more plausible than descriptivism
- Surely I am still referring to Richard Feynman, and saying something true about him, when I say:
 - 'Richard Feynman was a great physicist, but I don't really know anything more about him'

An Extra Complication

- The last thing I want to say about Kripke's idea of a chain of communication is that we need to make it a little bit more complicated
- As Kripke points out (*N&N*: 96–7), in order for you to acquire the use of a name, it is not enough that you causally interact with someone who already uses it

An Extra Complication

- Suppose you hear the name 'Napoleon' for the first time from someone lecturing on French history
- You're not really paying attention to the lecture, but you like the name
- You decide to steal the name 'Napoleon' as a name for your cat
- When you use the name 'Napoleon', you are clearly referring to your cat, not the French emperor!
 - When you say, 'Napoleon has a fluffy face', you are saying something true about your cat, not something false about an emperor



An Extra Complication

- So what more do you need to do acquire the use of a name from someone else?
- Simple: you just need to intend to use the name to refer to the same thing that the person you acquired it from used it refer to
- The person you acquired the name 'Napoleon' from was using it to refer to the French emperor, but you did not form the intention to use it in the same way

An Extra Complication

- This is a simple fix, but it does come at a cost: as Kripke (*N&N*: 97) puts it, we no longer have an **eliminative** explanation of reference, i.e. an explanation which itself doesn't mention the notion of reference
- But that isn't so uncommon in philosophy: can you give an eliminative explanation of knowledge, or goodness, or consciousness, or...?

The Key Thing To Remember

- These are the **KEY THINGS** to remember about the chains of communication in Kripke's Causal Picture
- (1) The reason that your use of a name, 'NN', refers to x is that there is a chain of communication going back to an initial baptism of x as 'NN'
 - (2) The chain of communication is a causal chain: you *hear* or *see* (or whatever) the use of 'NN'
 - (3) The way that you acquire the use of 'NN' from this sort of causal interaction is by forming the intention to use 'NN' to refer to the same thing as the person you were interacting with uses it to refer to

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Two Questions

- Earlier I said that there were two questions that we need to ask about Kripke's Causal Picture of Reference
 - (i) What happens at the initial baptism?
 - (ii) How exactly do the links in a chain of communication pass the use of a name on?
- In the last section we focussed on question (ii); in this section we will look at question (i)

What is an Initial Baptism?

- An initial baptism is supposed to be the event in which we introduce a name as the name of some person or thing
- The paradigm example is the naming of a child: the parents simply introduce the name for the child, and then that is its name
- After that, the chains of communication we discussed earlier spread the use of that name around
- But can we say anything more about how baptisms work?

Baptism by Ostension

- Kripke distinguishes two ways in which a baptism can work
- The first is by **ostension**
 - Ostension is the act of pointing to something in the environment, or otherwise bringing something in the environment to everybody's attention
 - For example, if I point to this desk, that is an act of ostension: I am *ostending* the desk
- When we name a child, this is usually done via ostension:
 - We simply ostend the child, and announce that this child is called 'NN'

The Sophistication of Ostension

- Baptism by ostension is probably the most ordinary kind of baptism, but there are a couple of comments worth making about it
- First, as Wittgenstein pointed out in his *Philosophical Investigations*, ostension is not quite as simple as it might seem
- Whenever we point at something, we are simultaneously pointing at lots of other things
 - For example, when I point at a child, I am also pointing at its skin, and at a particular collection of atoms, and at the air between us, and...

The Sophistication of Ostension

- So for baptism by ostension to work, you need to be able to figure out which of the many things I am pointing to is being baptised
 - If I point at a child and say, ‘This is to be called “Donald Trump” ’, am I baptising a child, a child’s skin, or a collection of atoms?
- Now clearly, we can figure out which thing is being baptised in an ostensive baptism, but the point is that this is a very sophisticated ability

The Limits of Baptism by Ostension

- The second comment I want to make is that baptism by ostension is fairly limited
- Sometimes, I want to introduce a name for something which isn't in my environment, and which I cannot ostend!
 - For example, suppose that that there is a Victorian policeman on the search for a murderer, and as of yet he has no idea who the murder is; the policeman might want to introduce a name for the murderer, 'Jack the Ripper', but clearly he cannot ostend the murderer — he does not know who the murderer is!
- Given the limitations of ostension, we need another method for baptism

Baptism by Description

- Happily, Kripke has another method for baptism: baptism by **description**
- To return to the case of 'Jack the Ripper', although the policeman cannot **ostend** the murderer, he can say this:
 - 'Jack the Ripper' is to refer to whoever committed the Whitechapel murders
- In this way, we can name the Whitechapel Murderer 'Jack the Ripper', even though we cannot ostend him

Baptism by Description versus Descriptivism

- You might be surprised by Kripke's willingness to use descriptions in baptisms: wasn't Kripke supposed to **reject** descriptivism?
- The fundamental claim of descriptivism is: every name is synonymous with some definite description
- That is what Kripke rejects, and he even rejects it in cases like 'Jack the Ripper'

Baptism by Description versus Descriptivism

- Even if the name 'Jack the Ripper' was introduced in the way I described, that does **not** make 'Jack the Ripper' synonymous with 'the person who committed the Whitechapel murders'
- If it were, then this sentence would be necessarily true:
 - Jack the Ripper is a murderer
- But it is not necessarily true: there is a possible world in which Jack the Ripper slipped, hit his head and entered a coma, long before he murdered anyone

Reference-Fixing Descriptions

- When Kripke rejected descriptivism, he rejected the idea that names are **synonymous** with definite descriptions
- But he (*N&N*: 57–9) is clear that we can still use a description to **fix the reference of a name**
 - When we use a description in a baptism to fix the reference of a name, that **does not** make the name synonymous with the description
 - We just use the description to pick a particular person out, and then use our new name as a rigid designator referring to that person
 - After the baptism, the description is just thrown away
- This is a **KEY POINT** to remember: we can fix the reference of a name with a description **without** making the name synonymous with the description!!!

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The Old Problems for Millianism

- There are several different objections we could raise against Kripke's Causal Picture
- First off, remember that Russell introduced descriptivism to deal with two old problems for Millianism
- The first was to explain why one of these sentences is trivial, and the other isn't:
 - (1) Hesperus = Phosphorus
 - (2) Hesperus = Hesperus
- The second was to explain how a sentence like this could be meaningful, even though 'Vulcan' does not refer to anything:
 - (3) Vulcan does not exist

The Old Problems for Millianism

- By rejecting descriptivism, Kripke has cut himself off from Russell's solutions to these problems
- Worse, it is not at all obvious how to solve these problems on the Causal Picture
- However, I do not want to linger on these problems: *maybe* there is some other way that Kripke can solve them
- I want to introduce a new problem, specific to Kripke's Causal Picture

Reference Changes

- We all know that sometimes, a name can change its reference over time: we start off using a name to refer to one thing, but over time we start using it to refer to something else
- We have already seen how Kripke can accommodate this when someone **intentionally** changes the reference of a name
 - You intentionally stole the name 'Napoleon', and gave it to your cat
- The trouble is, this sometimes happens unintentionally, and it is not clear how Kripke can accommodate that

Madagascar

- 'Madagascar' is the name of an island off the east coast of Africa
- But apparently, 'Madagascar' was *originally* a name for a portion of the African mainland
- Apparently, Marco Polo heard some locals use 'Madagascar', and for some reason thought that they were referring to the island
- But whatever exactly happened, it is undeniably true that *now*, 'Madagascar' has become a name of the island, not a portion of the mainland



The Madagascar Problem

- This sort of thing happens all the time, but it poses a problem for Kripke
- Marco Polo acquired the name 'Madagascar' from people who used it to refer to a portion of the African mainland
- **Importantly:** Marco Polo *intended* to use 'Madagascar' to refer to the same thing as the people he acquired it from
 - This is not like the case where you purposefully stole the name 'Napoleon' for your cat; Marco Polo was *intending* to use 'Madagascar' in the same way as the people he learnt it from
- On Kripke's Causal Picture, this should mean that as Marco Polo used it, 'Madagascar' refers to a bit of the African mainland

The Madagascar Problem

- What is more, it also means that as we use 'Madagascar' today, it **still** refers to a bit of the African mainland!
 - So long as we all intended to use 'Madagascar' in the same way as the people we acquired it from, then we form a chain which goes right back, via Marco Polo, to the initial baptism of a bit of mainland Africa
- But that is absurd: surely by now, 'Madagascar' refers to the island!
 - When we say 'Madagascar is an island', surely we are saying something true about an island, not something false about a portion of mainland Africa

The Madagascar Problem

- This problem has become known as the **Madagascar Problem**, and was introduced by Gareth Evans in his paper, 'The Causal Theory of Names'
- Evans thought that to solve it, we had to find a way of combining descriptivism with Kripke's Causal Picture
 - Like some descriptivists, Evans thought that every proper name was associated with a cluster of descriptions, but unlike those descriptivists, Evans did not think that the name just picked out whatever satisfied those descriptions
 - He thought that a name picked out the thing which was the **causal source** of that information
- Evans' theory is fascinating, but unfortunately, it is a story for another module; all I wanted to do was introduce his Madagascar Problem

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The Key Things To Remember

- Here are the **KEY THINGS** to remember from today's lecture
- According to Kripke's Causal Picture of Reference, names get their meanings fixed at an initial baptism, and then the use of that name is passed on to other people via a causal chain of communication
- Kripke distinguished two ways in which a baptism can work: by ostension and by description
- When we use a description to fix the reference of a name, that **does not** make the name synonymous with the description!!!
- Kripke's Causal Picture is attractive, but it has difficulties dealing with inadvertent reference shifts, as illustrated by Evans' Madagascar Problem

Seminars

- The reading for this week's seminar is Lecture Two 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
- For next weeks's lectures and seminar, first please re-read *N&N* Lecture One, and then read up to p. 116 of *N&N* Lecture Three