

Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*  
Lecture Six

Essential Properties

Rob Trueman  
rob.trueman@york.ac.uk

University of York

# Essential Properties

Introduction

Essential Properties

Essentiality of Human Ancestry

Essentiality of Material Origin

Summary

## Re-Cap: The Rejection of 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 rejected descriptivism after presenting a number of objections to it
- Kripke thinks that in general, names are not synonymous with descriptions; names do **not** describe the things they refer to
- Instead, names are **rigid designators**, referring to the very same object in every world

## Re-Cap: Necessity and A Priority

- Kripke uses this new view of names to argue that there are some necessary truths which can only be known a posteriori, and some contingent truths which can be known a priori
- **Necessary A Posteriori**
  - Hesperus is Phosphorus
- **Contingent A Priori**
  - *S* is one metre long

## This Lecture: Essential Properties

- In Lecture Three of *N&N* (pp.110–6), Kripke goes even further
- According to Kripke, people and objects have a number of **essential properties**
  - To say that  $F$  is an **essential** property of  $x$  is to say that  $x$  could not exist without being  $F$ : there is no possible world in which  $x$  exists but is not  $F$
- In this lecture, we will look more closely at the idea of an “essential property”, and at the examples of essential properties that Kripke suggests

# Essential Properties

Introduction

Essential Properties

Essentiality of Human Ancestry

Essentiality of Material Origin

Summary

## Trump Cat?

- Could Donald Trump have been a cat?
- Is there a possible world in which Donald Trump is a cat?
- Some of you might want to say: No, Donald Trump couldn't have been a cat. Trump is a *human*, and couldn't have been anything else!



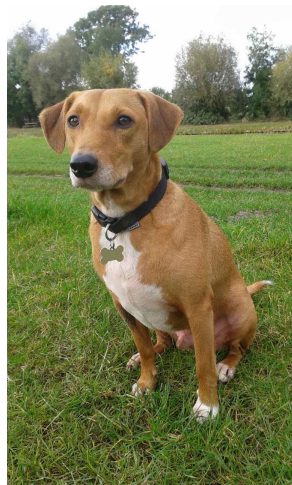
## Essentially Human, Accidentally President

- If that is what you say, then you are saying that *being human* is an **essential property** of Donald Trump
  - Trump couldn't exist without being human; there is no world in which Trump exists, and yet Trump is not human
- Not all of Trump's properties are essential to him
- Trump is the President of America, but he didn't **have to be**
  - There is a possible world in which Trump exists, but he is not the President
- So unlike *being human*, *being the President of America* is not an essential property of Trump
- Philosophers call non-essential properties like this, **accidental properties**



## The Definition of Essential

- To say that  $F$  is an **essential property** of  $x$  is to say that there is no possible world in which  $x$  exists but is not  $F$
- My dog Munnery is essentially a dog, because there is no world in which Munnery exists but is not a dog



## The Definition of Accidental

- To say that  $F$  is an **accidental property** of  $x$  is to say that although  $x$  is  $F$ , there is a possible world in which  $x$  exists and is not  $F$
- My other dog Kitson is accidentally stupid, because there is some world in which Kitson exists but is not stupid



## Scepticism about Essential Properties

- The idea of essential properties has a long history in philosophy, and in ordinary thought too
- However, by the time Kripke wrote *N&N*, lots of philosophers had become very sceptical about the whole idea of essential properties
- In particular, Quine thought that there is no objective fact of the matter about which properties are essential to an object; it all depends on how we happen to be *thinking* of that object

## Scepticism about Essential Properties

*Mathematicians may conceivably be said to be necessarily rational and not necessarily two-legged; and cyclists necessarily two-legged and not necessarily rational. But what of an individual who counts among his eccentricities both mathematics and cycling? Is this concrete individual necessarily rational and not necessarily two-legged or vice versa? Just in so far as we are talking referentially of the object, with no special bias towards a background grouping of mathematicians as against cyclists, or vice versa, there is no semblance of sense in rating some of his attributes as necessary and others as contingent.*

*(Quine 1960, Word and Object, p. 199)*

## Kripke on Essential Properties

- Kripke does not share Quine's scepticism about essential properties
  - Kripke insists that we *can* distinguish between an objects essential properties and its accidental ones, independently of any way we happen to be thinking about it
- Kripke gives some examples of essential properties, and we will look at them in a moment, but first I want to say a little about *why* Kripke and Quine disagree

## A Posteriori Essential Properties

- Like most philosophers in his day, Quine was not careful about the difference between necessity, a priori and analyticity
  - Quine just takes it for granted that every necessary truth is also a priori and analytic
- Plausibly, this is why he was so suspicious of objective essential properties
  - When we just consider the man Donald Trump, independent of any particular way of describing him, it is not analytic or a priori that he is human
  - So, Quine concludes, Donald Trump is not necessarily human, i.e. *being human* is not an essential property of Trump

## A Posteriori Essential Properties

- But Kripke has broken this tight link between necessity, a priori and analyticity
- There are necessary truths which can only be known a posteriori
  - Hesperus is Phosphorus
- For Kripke, things do have essential properties, but there is no guarantee that we can figure out what they are a priori
- For example, Donald Trump may well be essentially human, but if so, then that is an a posteriori truth

# Essential Properties

Introduction

Essential Properties

Essentiality of Human Ancestry

Essentiality of Material Origin

Summary



## Essential Identity

- The first essential property that Kripke gives us comes straight from his idea that the following is an a posteriori but **necessary** truth:
  - Hesperus is Phosphorus
- If this is necessarily true, then *being identical to Phosphorus* must be an **essential property** of Hesperus
  - There is no possible world in which Hesperus exists, but is not identical to Phosphorus

## Essential Origins

- But Kripke also suggests a brand new class of essential properties
- To put it roughly, Kripke thinks that the “origins” of an object are essential to that object
  - An object could not have different origins from the origins that it actually has
- This is only rough, and to make it more precise we need to think about the different sorts of origins that different sorts of thing have
- In this part of the lecture, we will focus on the origins of people

## You Couldn't Have Had Different Parents

- Applied to people, the idea that your origins are essential to you becomes the idea that it is essential to you that you had the particular parents that you had
  - You could not have had different parents
  - There is no world in which you exist, but have different parents
- We are all stuck, by necessity, with the parents we have!

## The Queen's Parents

- To illustrate this idea, Kripke (*N&N*: 112–3) asks whether Elizabeth II could have had different parents; in particular, could Mr. and Mrs. Truman have been her parents, instead of George VI and Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon?
- Kripke insists that they could not
  - They could have had a child who looked just like Elizabeth II, who had all the same personality traits, and who even ended up being the Queen of England
  - But it still is not possible for the Trumans to be the parents of Elizabeth II
  - Elizabeth II has the parents she actually had in every possible world

## An Objection

- Hold on, are we **really** saying that the Trumans **couldn't** have been Elizabeth II's parents?
- Although it is **incredibly unlikely**, couldn't it turn out that the Trumans were her parents all along, but there was a huge conspiracy to cover up that fact?
- Can't we imagine that story breaking on the news tomorrow, and all of the consequences that would fall out from it?
- If all of this could happen tomorrow, doesn't that mean that it is not essential to Elizabeth II that George VI and Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon were her parents?

## Epistemic Possibility

- Even Kripke (*N&N*: 112) wants to agree that there is a *sense* in which it is “possible” that tomorrow we could find out that the Trumans are really Elizabeth II’s parents
- But importantly, this is a different concept of possibility from the one that Kripke (and we) has been focussing on
- When we say that it could turn out that the Trumans are Elizabeth’s parents, we mean something like this:
  - The evidence we have available to us does not *definitively* rule out the suggestion that the Trumans are Elizabeth II’s parents

## Epistemic Possibility

- Philosophers call this kind of possibility **epistemic possibility**
- Roughly, to say that  $P$  is epistemically possible is to say that  $P$  is compatible with all the evidence that we currently have
  - This is the kind of possibility that we express when we say something like: For all we know, it could be that  $P$
- So Kripke is willing to grant that it is **epistemically** possible that the Trumans were Elizabeth II's parents
  - Although it is *very* unlikely, it is just about compatible with our evidence that the Trumans are really Elizabeth's parents

## Metaphysical Possibility

- Importantly, however, we are not primarily concerned with this kind of **epistemic** possibility in this module
- Way back in Lecture 1, I emphasised that we are interested in the **metaphysical** concepts of possibility, necessity and contingency
- To say that  $P$  is metaphysically possible is not to make a claim about what we know, but to say how the world itself could have been
  - It is metaphysically possible that  $P$  iff there is a possible world in which  $P$



## Metaphysical Possibility

- Kripke's claim is that it is not metaphysically possible for Elizabeth II to have had different parents from the ones she actually had, whoever they were
- So *given that the Trumans are not in fact Elizabeth's parents*, it is not **metaphysically possible** for them to be her parents

## Why Think that Your Parents are Essential?

- We now understand what Kripke is claiming:
  - It is **epistemically** possible that the Trumans are Elizabeth II's parents: our evidence makes it overwhelmingly unlikely, but cannot definitively rule it out
  - But *given that the Trumans are not in fact Elizabeth's parents*, it is **metaphysically** impossible for them to be
- What argument does Kripke give for this claim?
- The honest answer is that Kripke does not give much of an argument at all
- It seems that it just strikes Kripke (*N&N*: 112–3) as **intuitively right** that you could not have had different parents

## For the Essentiality of Ancestry

- There definitely seems something odd about the idea that someone could have had different parents
- When we imagine different possible worlds involving Elizabeth II, we are imagining different courses her life could have took; we take the history of her life, and tweak it here and there
- But when we try to imagine that Elizabeth II was born of different parents, we are trying to change something about her that happened before her life began; we are trying to change the very starting point of her history

(See Ahmed's 2007 book *Saul Kripke*, pp.47–8, for a discussion of this line of thought)

## Against the Essentiality of Ancestry

- On the other hand, we do sometimes speak as if we could have had different parents
  - “If I had had your parents, I would have had a lot more opportunities than I actually did!”
- Conditionals like this are philosophically tricky, but we all understand them, and it seems plausible to say that if I say something like that, I am presupposing that I could have had your parents
- What is more, we mean this “could” in the **metaphysical** sense, not a merely **epistemic** one
  - I am quite certain that we had different parents; I am saying that in a different world where I have your parents, I have more opportunities

**STRAW POLL:** who here agrees with Kripke that you could not have had different parents?

# Essential Properties

Introduction

Essential Properties

Essentiality of Human Ancestry

Essentiality of Material Origin

Summary

## Could This Table Be Built From Something Else?

- Earlier I said that Kripke thinks that the “origins” of an object are essential to that object
- Applied to people, that became the claim that it is essential to a person that they have the parents that they do
- Kripke also applies this idea to inanimate objects, like this table
- According to Kripke, it is essential to this table that it is was made out of the particular bits of wood, metal etc. that it was actually made of
  - There is no possible world in which this table exists, but is made out of different raw materials

## In Kripke's Words

*In the case of this table, we may not know what block of wood the table came from. Now could **this table** have been made from a completely **different** block of wood, or even of water cleverly hardened into ice — water taken from the Thames River? We could conceivably discover that, contrary to what we now think, this table is indeed made of ice from the river. But let us suppose that it is not.*



## In Kripke's Words

*Then, though we can imagine making a table out of another block of wood or even from ice, identical in appearance with this one, and though we could have put it in this very position in the room, it seems to me that this is **not** to imagine **this** table as made of wood or ice, but rather it is to imagine another table, **resembling** this one in all external details, made of another block of wood, or even of ice.*

*(N&N: 113–4)*

## Metaphysical Impossibility, Epistemic Possibility

- Kripke is doing two things in this passage
- First he is affirming that it is essential to this table that it be made from the particular raw materials it was made from
  - It is not **metaphysically possible** for this table to exist and yet be made from different stuff
- But second, he is conceding that it is **epistemically possible** that this table be made of something different from what it actually is
  - Although it is incredibly unlikely, it is still compatible with all of our evidence that this table is really made of ice, ingeniously disguised to look like wood

## Why Think That Material Origins Are Essential?

- But why does Kripke think it is essential to this table that it be made out of the particular raw materials it was made from?
- Well, in part just because it seems intuitively correct: it strikes Kripke as simply obvious that we cannot imagine a world in which this very table exists, but is made from other stuff
- In fairness to Kripke, he also offers an argument (*N&N*: 114 fn. 56) this time
- However, that argument is fiddly, and is generally agreed not to work (see Ahmed 2007, *Saul Kripke*, pp. 48–51)

**STRAW POLL:** who here agrees with Kripke that this table could not have been built from different raw materials?

# Essential Properties

Introduction

Essential Properties

Essentiality of Human Ancestry

Essentiality of Material Origin

Summary

## Essential versus Accidental Properties

- As we have seen, Kripke's candidates for essential properties are not entirely problematic
- But really, these candidates do not matter too much; the **KEY IDEA** that really matters is the very distinction between essential and accidental properties itself
- To say that  $F$  is an **essential property** of  $x$  is to say that there is no possible world in which  $x$  exists but is not  $F$
- To say that  $F$  is an **accidental property** of  $x$  is to say that although  $x$  is  $F$ , there is a possible world in which  $x$  exists and is not  $F$

## Metaphysical versus Epistemic Possibility

- The other **KEY IDEA** that we have come up against is the distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility
- The **epistemic** concept of possibility is concerned with the limits of our knowledge about the actual world
  - To say that it is epistemically possible that  $P$  is to say that  $P$  is compatible with all the evidence that we currently have
- The **metaphysical** concept of possibility is concerned with different ways the world could have been
  - To say that it is metaphysically possible that  $P$  is to say that  $P$  is true in some possible world

## Metaphysical versus Epistemic Possibility

- Historically, philosophers have been very bad at keeping in mind the distinction between epistemic and metaphysical possibility
- Before Kripke, philosophers tended to assume that the a priori/a posteriori distinction was co-extensive with the necessary/contingent distinction
- In fact, lots of philosophers didn't even realise that they were two different distinctions!
- As I emphasised in Lecture 1, the a priori/a posteriori distinction is an epistemic distinction
- So because they blurred the a priori/a posteriori distinction with the necessary/contingent distinction, philosophers couldn't see the difference between the metaphysical and epistemic concepts of *possibility*



## Metaphysical versus Epistemic Possibility

- But now we are clear on the difference between these concepts
  - $P$  is epistemically possible if it is compatible with all of our evidence about how the actual world is
  - $P$  is metaphysically possible if there is some world in which  $P$  is true
- Like Kripke, we are focussed on metaphysical possibility, and that is what I will mean by 'possible' unless I make clear otherwise

## A Posteriori Essential Properties

- So when Kripke says that it is impossible for you to have had different parents, he is making a metaphysical claim, not an epistemic one
- And importantly, this metaphysical claim may be something that we can only know **a posteriori**
- This is another of the **KEY IDEAS** of this lecture:
  - If  $F$  is an essential property of  $a$ , then it will be **necessarily** true that if  $a$  exists then  $a$  is  $F$ ; but that may be something which we can only know **a posteriori**

## Seminars

- For this week's seminar, please re-read *N&N* Lecture One, and then read up to p. 116 of *N&N* Lecture Three
- I have also posted some questions on the VLE: you need to bring short **written** answers to those questions to the seminars
- For next week's lectures and seminar, read the remainder of Lecture Three of *N&N*