Philosophy of Language

Notes on Wittgenstein, Kripke and the Nature of Truth

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(Based on my notes and papers for a philosophy of language class

taken in January 2008 at San Francisco State University)

~ Part 2: Kripke, Naming, and Private Language ~

~ Kripke ~

Accounts of naming and reference:

There are two major accounts of names: Gottlob Frege's and Bertrand Russell's, on the one hand, and Saul Kripke's (which is based on J. S. Mill's) on the other—

1) For Frege and Russell, the reference of a name is determined by a description (or set of descriptions) associated with it in the mind of a speaker. Names are really definite descriptions in disguise. A *definite description* is a description that purports to pick out a single individual, such as 'the author of *Waverly*' (which happens to pick out Sir Walter Scott), 'the most famous physicist of the Twentieth century' (Albert Einstein), 'the first President of the United States' (George Washington) and 'the current King of France' (which doesn't pick out anyone because France currently has no King).

2) On the Frege-Russell account one might associate the description "the most prolific pupil of Plato" with the name 'Aristotle'. Provided that there is at least one such pupil, and that there are not two or more pupils of Plato who are tied in being more prolific than all the rest, this description will pick out a unique individual, and whoever that is will be Aristotle. It must be stressed that this theory allows for the fact that not everyone would have to associate the same description with the same name, nor would the same person at different times.

3) For Kripke, on the other hand, names are like tags which pick out their referents directly—they are, in other words, *directly referential*. A name is connected to its referent via a certain sort of causal chain, which stretches through time from current utterances of the name all the way back to an initial "baptism" in which its referent was first named. During a typical baptism a person will attend or point to an object which causally affects them in some way—perhaps by the light it reflects—and pronounce a word which, in the right circumstances, becomes the object's name.[1] Others hear the baptizer utter this name and come to use it themselves. Still others hear it from them and come to use it as well, etc. In this way the name can be passed on to an ever increasing number of speakers. So long as they intend to use the name to refer to the same thing as did those from whom they got it, they too can use it to refer to that thing, even if they have never encountered it and know next to nothing about it. Indeed, they can successfully use the name to refer to it when a substantial portion of their beliefs about it are false.

4) Frege and Russell's theory is ambiguous, as Kripke points out.[2] Does a description *give the meaning* of a name, so that the name and the description mean precisely the same thing, or does a description merely *fix a name's reference*? According to Kripke, if a description *gave the meaning* of a name, so that, as in the above example, 'Aristotle' *meant* "the most prolific pupil of Plato", it would follow that Aristotle is *necessarily* the most prolific pupil of Plato. For if Aristotle were *not* the most prolific pupil of Plato, it would follow, according to the Frege-Russell theory, that the most prolific pupil of Plato was not the most prolific pupil of Plato, a seeming contradiction. If, however, the description "the most prolific pupil of Plato" merely *fixes the reference* of the name 'Aristotle', then the meaning of the description serves only to pick out Aristotle and assign him to the name 'Aristotle' as its referent. Because of that, it can still be true that Aristotle, although he is in fact the most prolific pupil of Plato, need not have been. This is seen by Kripke as an advantage of his view, because he would regard the idea that Aristotle was necessarily the most prolific pupil of Plato as highly counterintuitive.

[1] These circumstances may include such background conditions as that the object does not already have a name or that the baptizer is authorized to name this object.

[2] *Naming and Necessity*, pp 32-4 and pp. 57-9.

5) How is it possible that Aristotle could have failed to be the most prolific pupil of Plato, given that he is in actual fact? Kripke would say it is possible because proper names are rigid designators and descriptions are not. A *rigid designator* picks out its referent in all possible worlds where that referent exists. (The word 'designator' applies to both names and descriptions.) To put it in simpler terms, a name, as we actually use it, applies to its referent no matter what could have happened to it. This is *not* to say that an object necessarily has the name it does, for we might have called it something quite different. Rather, the name's being a rigid designator requires only that when we talk about what could have happened to its referent in different possible circumstances, we are still genuinely talking about *it*. A non-rigid designator, by contrast, picks out different things in different possible worlds. That is to say, when we use a non-rigid designator in talking about various possible circumstances, it may refer to a different object from the one it actually refers to. Take the description "the first female governor of Alaska". As it happens, this description refers to Sarah Palin. But Sarah Palin could have lived without ever having been the first female governor of Alaska, so there is a sense in which "The first female governor of Alaska could have failed to be the first female governor of Alaska" is true. Unlike proper names, the description "the first female governor of Alaska" shifts its reference depending on which possible circumstances one is talking about, so someone else could have been the first female governor of Alaska. But no one else could have been Sarah Palin.

The Gödel-Schmidt case:

Suppose that someone named 'Schmidt' is the true discoverer of (what we think of as) Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems, and that Gödel stole them from him and covered his tracks so well that he was never found out. Kripke thinks that, even if this had been true, when someone who had heard *only* that Gödel discovered those theorems uses the name 'Gödel', they refer to Gödel and not Schmidt.

Searle on Kripke's account—

The definite descriptions view was very popular before Kripke's work. In 1958, John Searle held that names abbreviate a *cluster* of definite descriptions. Searle was critical of Kripke's account. Two of his criticisms were:

The Madagascar counterexample:

> 'Madagascar' was originally used to refer to a part of the mainland of Africa, yet because of Marco Polo it came to refer instead to an island off Africa's coast. How did that come about?

On the Gödel-Schmidt case:

> What if we tell someone that Schmidt really discovered the incompleteness theorems and ask them who they had meant to refer to. If they say it was Schmidt, what should we conclude?

Searle takes these examples to show that it's not *just*, or even *primarily*, the *causal connection* which preserves and transfers meanings, but rather the *intentions* of speakers and the definite descriptions they use. It should be noted that in Searle's opinion the description could be something more like a *thought* or a *judgment*; and so it doesn't have to be explicitly formulated in words. It could thus be called a 'non-linguistic description' (this is my term, not Searle's), if that doesn't strike the reader as sounding too paradoxical. In the first example, 'Madagascar', though linked by a causal chain to a part of the Africa mainland, came to refer to an island off its coast because, due to Marco Polo's mistake, they thought it referred to that island and thus *intended to refer to it*. In the second case, Searle thinks that if someone says that they meant to refer to Schmidt that shows that their intention was to refer to *whomever actually proved the incompleteness theorems*, and so for such a speaker 'Gödel' is roughly equivalent to the description 'the man who actually proved the incompleteness theorems.'[3]

[3] "Proper Names and Intentionality," reprinted in *The Philosophy of Language* pp. 308-24, first published in Searle's book *Intentionality*, pp. 231-61(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Kripke on Natural Kinds—

Natural kind terms are those that pick out *natural kinds*, kinds that really exist out there in the world, as opposed to "non-natural kind terms," which merely pick out sets of things that we have grouped together more-or less arbitrarily, for our convenience. Natural kind terms are often said to "carve nature at the joints." Some (purported) examples of natural kind terms are:

'gold'

'water'

'electron'

'tiger'

Some examples of "non-natural kind terms" might be:

'clock'

'furniture'

'thing to take on a camping trip'

'junk'

Kripke thinks that natural kind terms are also rigid designators: they pick out the same kind in every possible situation in which there are things of that kind. Kripke thinks that natural kinds have *essential properties*—properties that members of that kind *must* have, no matter what. Kant thought that "Gold is a yellow metal" is necessarily true, and hence (to use Kripkean terminology) that being yellow is an essential property of gold. Kripke thinks that that is at best contingently true, and hence that being yellow is not an essential property of gold. However, if gold is a natural kind it must have *some* essential properties, and since Kripke thinks that "Gold has the atomic weight 79" is necessarily true, he thinks that having the atomic weight 79 is one such property.[4]

[4] See *Naming and Necessity*, pp.123-5.

~ Direct Reference vs. Private Language? ~

I will now relate Kripke's account to one of the topics we touched on in Part 1: Wittgenstein's critique of private language I must emphasize that this section, more than any of the others, represents my own views rather than the instructor's.

1) If Kripke's account of naming is correct, we may say either that names *refer* but have no *meaning*, or that the *meaning* of a name *just is* its *bearer*. Either way, Wittgenstein's view is in trouble, for the Private Language Argument rests on the assumption that names do have a kind of meaning, in the form of a rule which governs their correct application. Consider this excerpt from section 258 of *PI* : "A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign.—Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation.—But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness." (*PI* p. 92) But it is doubtful that such a conception of meaning applies to the sort of expressions being considered here.

2) What, for instance, would the rule for the correct use of the name 'Aristotle' be? Would it be "Apply the name 'Aristotle' to Aristotle and no one else"? If one does not know who 'Aristotle' applies to this rule is useless, and if one does know who 'Aristotle' applies to this rule is entirely superfluous. At most it tells us that the name 'Aristotle' is to be applied to *someone*. Undoubtedly one could come up with more substantive rules—such as "Apply the name 'Aristotle' to the teacher of Alexander the Great and no one else"—but such a rule cannot give the *meaning* of the name 'Aristotle', for the familiar Kripkean reason that while Aristotle might never have taught Alexander the Great, he would still have been Aristotle. Now, if Aristotle has any essential properties that he does not share with anything else—properties which are essential to him, and him alone--we could say that we are to apply the name 'Aristotle' to whatever it is that uniquely exemplifies those properties. However, it is not easy to discern what those properties may be, and so they cannot ground our use of the name 'Aristotle' in actual practice.

3) Note also how Wittgenstein quickly passes from saying that a definition[5] *establishes the meaning* of a sign to saying that one *impresses a connection on oneself* through an act of attention. The connection between a sign and a sensation is a relation of *reference*, and if one thinks of reference as Kripke does it will sound very odd to talk of "impressing" such a relation on oneself or of "remembering" it. What could it mean, on a view like Kripke's, to impress on oneself the connection between the name 'Aristotle' and the man to whom it refers? For Kripke this connection is grounded in a certain series of causal relations, and it exists whether I remember them or not. On a view like Kripke's, to use the name 'Aristotle' meaningfully—or "referentially," if we hold names to be meaningless—one need only stand in certain causal relations to Aristotle and intend to use the name to refer to the same thing as those from whom one got it. Whether one also has certain beliefs about Aristotle, undertakes to "use" the name 'Aristotle' in a certain way, or is able to "remember" the referential link between the name and its bearer will not affect the meaning or reference of the name. Apart from this *there is no criterion for its correct use*. Names can be used significantly because they stand in certain relations to something in the world, not because of any rules we supply to govern their application. The same could be said of the terms of a private language.

4) In opposition to Wittgenstein, one could propose the following Kripke-inspired picture of the meaningfulness of sensation words. Suppose I am a private linguist who wants to record occurrences of a private sensation—a toothache, for instance—in a calendar of the sort Wittgenstein mentions in section 258 of *PI*. On having the toothache I go over to the calendar and inscribe the sign 'T'. Since I am trying to keep track of the *recurrence* of this sensation, I am evidently using 'T' a general term, not as a name for that particular toothache. The term 'T' is, when used in this way, a *natural kind term*. To establish its reference I simply attend to my toothache and think something like "Let this kind of pain be called 'T';" just as I can attend to a particular kind of substance and say "Let this kind of metal be called 'gold'." In order to establish a relation between my sign 'T' and this

[5] By which he means *ostensive* definition, as is made clear earlier in section 258.

kind of pain I need not impress on myself any connection or give myself any rule for its use, for terms which are introduced in this way either have their referent as their meaning or have no meaning at all. The baptism itself is all that is needed for me to use the sign significantly. Once the reference of 'T' has been established, I can use the sign in the future to refer to the same class of pains simply by intending to use it in the same way I originally did, even if the initial baptism has long since been forgotten and I now apply the term 'T' (incorrectly) to pains which are not toothaches. The reference is passed on to my future selves much as the reference of proper names such as 'Aristotle' is passed on to subsequent speakers. Moreover, if others should stumble across my calendar they can also use the sign 'T' to refer to my toothaches, even if they have no means of discovering what 'T' stands for.

5) If the Private Language Argument is sound, sensation words must have publicly accessible criteria for their correct application in order to be meaningful. If there is no such thing as a criterion for the correct use of words of this kind, Wittgenstein's argument seems to lose its force. The upshot of the foregoing considerations is that if Kripke's theory of naming is right the notion of a private language might be intelligible after all.

References

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