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0. Introduction

In this paper I will describe and defend a particular version of the description theory of proper names. This theory simply states that the meaning of a proper name N is more or less equivalent to the meaning of the description *the individual who bears the name 'N'*.

Section one describes the basics of the theory. Section two defends the theory against the objection that it is what Frege (1892) called a (mere) meta-linguistic solution. Section three is devoted to defending the theory against the objections that Kripke (1972) leveled against the theses he numbered (2) through (5) that define the description theory of names in general. Section four defends the theory against Kripke's claim that this theory (which he attributes to W. Kneale) is circular. Section five is devoted to defending the theory against Kripke's objection to thesis (6). Section seven describes a particular strength of this theory – its ability to account for non-rigid uses of proper names. Several different kinds of examples are given where proper names are used non-rigidly.

1. Theory Basics

In a nutshell, my proposal is that the meaning of a proper name is equivalent to that of a definite description, where the descriptive content is simply that the subject bears that proper name. So using a theory such as that of Russell (1905), the meaning of sentence (1) could be described with the expression (2):

- (1) Socrates is wise.
- (2) $\exists x (\text{bear}(x, \text{`Socrates'}) \land \text{wise}(x) \land \forall y (\text{bear}(y, \text{`Socrates'}) \rightarrow y = x))$

This says that there is an individual which uniquely stands in the *bears* relation to the expression 'Socrates', and is wise. By 'bear' here, I simply mean that relation which holds between things and their proper names. In English it is often expressed (at least roughly) by the verb *name*, as in *the person named Socrates*. Note, however, that the *bears* relation, which is associated only with the syntactic construction used with proper names, is distinct from the *names*, relation, which is associated with the verb *name*, and may have subtly different semantics, as will be seen below.

2. A Mere Meta-Linguistic Solution?

One of the virtues of this approach to proper names is that it allows us to solve Frege's puzzle about how an identity statement involving proper names can be both true and meaningful. This is simply the same solution as Russell gives for definite descriptions. The sentence (3) is given the meaning described by the expression (4).

- (3) Cicero is Tully.
- (4) $\exists x \exists y (\text{bear}(x, \text{`Cicero'}) \land \forall z (\text{bear}(z, \text{`Cicero'}) \rightarrow z = x) \land \text{bear}(y, \text{`Tully'}) \land \forall z (\text{bear}(z, \text{`Tully'}) \rightarrow z = y) \land x = y)$

In this expression, there is no constituent which corresponds to *Cicero*, and no constituent which corresponds to *Tully*. So the former could not be replaced by the latter (assuming that Cicero actually is Tully), to get the meaning of the uninformative (5), whose meaning the present approach would describe with the expression (6).

- (5) Tully is Tully.
- (6) $\exists x \exists y (\text{bear}(x, \text{`Tully'}) \land \forall z (\text{bear}(z, \text{`Tully'}) \rightarrow z = x) \land \text{bear}(y, \text{`Tully'}) \land \forall z (\text{bear}(z, \text{`Tully'}) \rightarrow z = y) \land x = y)$

Note that (6) is as uninformative as (5) – it is true just in case there is just one individual who bears the name Tully.

But isn't this solution essentially the one that Frege initially embraced in his *Begriffsschrift*, but ultimately rejected as merely a metalinguistic solution? The objection would be that a statement like (4) only gives us information about how we happen to use the terms "Cicero" and "Tully". It doesn't tell us anything of substance. But certainly, statements like (4) can't be what Frege had in mind. They can be used in drawing new inferences. To use an example from Cohen (2007), suppose you know of Cicero that he is a mediocre philosopher, but you know of Tully that he is a compelling orator (not knowing that they are one and the same person). According to the current theory, these facts that you know would be described as follows.

(7) a) $\exists x (\text{bear}(x, \text{`Cicero'}) \land \text{bad-philosopher}(x) \land \forall y (\text{bear}(y, \text{`Cicero'}) \rightarrow y = x))$ b) $\exists x (\text{bear}(x, \text{`Tully'}) \land \text{good-orator}(x) \land \forall y (\text{bear}(y, \text{`Tully'}) \rightarrow y = x))$

Now suppose, in addition, you learned (4). You could make inferences you couldn't make before – namely, those in (8).

(8) a) $\exists x (\text{bear}(x, \text{`Cicero'}) \land \text{good-orator}(x) \land \forall y (\text{bear}(y, \text{`Cicero'}) \rightarrow y = x))$ b) $\exists x (\text{bear}(x, \text{`Tully'}) \land \text{bad-philosopher}(x) \land \forall y (\text{bear}(y, \text{`Tully'}) \rightarrow y = x))$

The idea is that since from (4) we know that there is only one individual that bears the name "Tully", and only one individual that bears the name "Cicero", and they are the same individual, then any fact we know independently about one, we may infer about the other.

3. Kripke's Criticisms of the Description Theory of Names (2 – 5)

Kripke (1972) defines a class of theories of names, which he calls the descriptive theory of names. This theory is given by six theses. By and large, these theses are true of

the present proposal for names. In fact, Kripke's theses allow for a more general theory of names, where the meanings of names are given by clusters of descriptions. The present theory is simpler than that – there is a single description. Thus, I will list the theses as they apply to this narrower range of theories. The first thesis is just a definition: 1) To every name "*X*," there corresponds a property φ such that *A* believes " φ *X*".

The other five theses he regards as more substantive, and provides arguments why he believes any theory of names based on them must be unsatisfactory. Here, I will list theses (2) through (5), and show why his objections to these hold no force against the present theory.

Thesis (2) says that the property is believed by *A* to pick out some individual uniquely. Kripke uses the example of two individuals, Richard Feynman and Murray Gell-Mann. At the time of Kripke's writing, they were both leading contemporary theoretical physicists. It is easy to imagine somebody who knows nothing other than that about these two men, and thus cannot differentiate them, and yet this person could still use their names to refer to them uniquely. But wait – there is one thing that everybody knows about them that does differentiate them: (the [written or phonetic] form of) their names! And indeed, this is precisely the property that the current theory uses in the meaning of the name.

Thesis (3) says that if the property is satisfied by one unique object y, then y is the referent of "X." Kripke introduces the hypothetical situation whereby Kurt Gödel didn't actually prove the incompleteness of arithmetic as everybody thinks; it was really proven by some other man, named Schmidt. The idea is that if "the prover of the incompleteness of arithmetic" is the property which is associated with the name "Gödel", then the name

would have to refer to Schmidt instead of to Gödel, but of course "Gödel" refers to Gödel. The implication is that a similar story could be told about any property you may want to associate with the name "Gödel". But this is not the case for the present theory. To say that Gödel might not actually bear the name "Gödel" is an absurdity. The name "Gödel" really does refer to whoever it is that bears it.

Thesis (4) says that if no unique object satisfies the description, "*X*" does not refer. Kripke uses both the Feynman and Gödel examples to refute this thesis. Again, Kripke is using "leading theoretical physicist" as an example description to be associated with the name "Feynman". Since there is more than one leading theoretical physicist, "Feynman" shouldn't be able to refer to anybody, according to thesis (4). Similarly, if nobody had come up with the proof of the incompleteness of arithmetic, "Gödel" shouldn't be able to refer to anybody, supposing that "prover of the incompleteness of arithmetic" is the descriptive content associated with the name "Gödel". But of course, "Feynman" refers to Feynman no matter how many leading theoretical physicists there are, and "Gödel" would refer to Gödel even if that proof was written by nobody.

But thesis (4) *is* appropriate for the current theory. If there were really nobody who bears the name "Gödel", then "Gödel" would refer to nobody. But what if there is more than one individual named "Feynman"? doesn't the current theory, by thesis (4) predict that "Feynman" couldn't refer to anybody?

Not really. Thesis (4) should be understood to mean that some unique object *relevant in the current context* must satisfy the description. It is an issue for any theory of definite descriptions that the description be restricted to the objects that are relevant in the current context. Sentences such as *The book is on the table* are quite understandable even

though the universe contains more than one book and more than one table. Similarly for names. Now, even if we restrict ourselves to individuals relevant in the current context, the example descriptive contents in Kripke's examples are still vulnerable to his criticisms. Even if there is more than one theoretical physicist relevant in the current context, "Feynman" will still refer to Feynman. But if there is more than one individual that bears the name "Feynman" relevant in the current context, then there really will be a problem using the name "Feynman". The context has to be modified in some way (e.g. by answering the question *Which Feynman do you mean?*) in order for the name to go through. Similarly, if there is nobody relevant in the current context who bears the name "Gödel", then there will be problems using that name to refer to anybody.

Thesis (5) says that the statement "If *X* exists then *X* has φ " is known *a priori* by the speaker. Kripke refutes this thesis with the Gödel case again. Even if the speaker is right in believing that Gödel proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, the speaker doesn't know this *a priori*. Again, this kind of objection simply doesn't apply to the current theory. If there is anything I know about Gödel without having to make any empirical study it is that his name is "Gödel". If I open up a book¹, and the first sentence is *Enoch rounds the corner just as the executioner raises the noose above the woman's head*, then even though I know nothing else about Enoch, I know his(?) name must be "Enoch".

4. Circularity

Presumably, Kripke doesn't worry about the way this particular instantiation of the description theory overcomes his criticisms of theses (2) - (5), because he dismisses it as circular before even bringing these criticisms up. His idea is that to explain the

¹ *Quicksilver* by Neal Stephenson. 2003. HarperCollins, New York.

meaning of the name in terms of the name itself will lead us nowhere. The way he puts it is to suppose I were trying to determine the reference of the name 'Glunk'. If I simply decided that the reference of that name would be the man I call 'Glunk', then I have said nothing at all.

But of course, this isn't at all how we use proper names. That is, we don't start out with a name and then decide what it should refer to. Individuals are presented to us in the world bearing names. This bearing of names is prior to any use we make of those names (although we are not powerless to cause certain people to bear certain names). If we want to find out who the referent of a given name is, we just look in the world and see who is associated with that name (perhaps we look the name up in the phone book). If we want to refer to an individual by its name, again, we just look in the world and see which names that individual is associated with (perhaps we ask somebody).

The ways in which individuals come to bear the names that they bear is not uninteresting. Certainly, the causal picture of naming presented by Kripke and elaborated and argued over by Putnam (1973), Evans (1973) and Searle (1983) is probably on the right track. However, on the current view, it is incidental to the way that proper names work. For the current theory, it is of primary interest only that there be some way that individuals come to be associated with names, it is of secondary interest what that way is. Compare this to the sentence *He loves her*. Although it may be true that the meaning of this sentence can only be fully explicated when we know the meaning of the word *love*, in all its psychological and philosophical detail, but these things are not central to the notion of how intransitive verbs work in specific, or to the philosophy of language in

general. Similarly, the study of how individuals come to bear the names they do is more a question of historical onomastics than of semantics.

5. Modal Arguments

According to Kripke, one of the ways that proper names behave differently from definite descriptions is that proper names are rigid designators, and definite descriptions are not. That is, a proper name is always evaluated with respect to the actual world at the current time, even if it is used with a modal operator. This is not the case for definite descriptions. For example, sentence (9) is true, but sentence (10) is not.

(9) Socrates is necessarily Socrates.

(10) Socrates is necessarily the one named Socrates.

The first thing to notice here is that (10) is actually ambiguous, depending on whether the description *the one named Socrates* is interpreted, in the language of Donnellan (1966), attributively or referentially. If it is interpreted attributively, (10) is not true (since Socrates might have been given some other name). But if it is interpreted referentially, then (10) is true, and for exactly the same reason that (9) is true.

This ambiguity can be described quite naturally as an ambiguity in the relative scope between the modal operator and the quantifier in the definite description *the one named Socrates*. So the two possible readings of (10) can be described by these expressions²:

- (11) $\exists x \text{ (bear}(x, \text{ 'Socrates')} \land \forall y \text{ (bear}(y, \text{ 'Socrates')} \rightarrow y = x) \land \Box (\exists z \text{ (named}(z, \text{ 'Socrates')} \land \forall w \text{ (named}(w, \text{ 'Socrates')} \rightarrow z = w) \land z = x)))$
- (12) $\exists x \text{ (bear}(x, \text{ `Socrates')} \land \forall y \text{ (bear}(y, \text{ `Socrates')} \rightarrow y = x) \land \\ \exists z \text{ (named}(z, \text{ `Socrates')} \land \forall w \text{ (named}(w, \text{ `Socrates')} \rightarrow z = w) \land \Box (z = x)))$

² The relations *bear* and *named* are presumed to be essentially the same. I left them with separate names to make it clearer which came from the explicit definite description, and which came from the use of the proper name.

Expression (11) is not true (under reasonable interpretations of necessity), but expression (12) is true.

Under this analysis, proper names work just like normal definite descriptions, except that they always take wide scope, whereas normal definite descriptions are not restricted regarding the scope they may take. If this is true, should we regard this as a radical difference in kind between proper names and definite descriptions? Not necessarily. If we take a look at the way the relative scope of quantifiers is determined in English we'll see that it is nothing too unusual for proper names to prefer wide scope so strongly.

Sentences with more than one quantified noun phrase are generally susceptible to more than one reading, each one corresponding to the relative scope of those quantifiers. For instance, sentence (13) has the readings (14) and (15), the only difference being the scope of the quantifiers.

(13) Some man loves every woman

(14) $\exists x (man(x) \land \forall y (woman(y) \rightarrow loves(x, y)))$

(15) $\forall y (\operatorname{woman}(y) \to \exists x (\operatorname{man}(x) \land \operatorname{loves}(x, y)))$

Often, one of the possible scope orders will be more natural than the other. Syntactic factors may affect this. For instance, subjects of sentences tend to take wide scope over objects. So in sentence (16), we prefer the reading where there are two (possibly) different languages for each person, while in sentence (17), we prefer the reading where everybody speaks the same two languages.

(16) Every person in this room speaks two languages.

(17) Two languages are spoken by every person in this room.

Pragmatic factors also come into play. Since we know that typically only one person eats any given cookie, we understand *every person* to take wide scope in each of these sentences.

- (18) Every person ate a cookie.
- (19) A cookie was eaten by every person.

Similar factors are likely at play in determining the relative scope of proper names. It is possible that proper names, by virtue of their syntax, prefer to take wide scope more than definite descriptions do. And although the name an individual bears might vary from possible world to possible world, it is, pragmatically, part of the purpose of proper names that they *can* refer rigidly across worlds, so we tend to understand them as if they do.

6. Non-Rigid Proper Names

So even if we were to concede that names are exclusively rigid designators, it wouldn't be a very strong argument against the current proposal. It would only motivate the minor *ad hoc* stipulation that while names are definite descriptions, they always take wide scope. However, there are uses of proper names which crucially take narrow scope with respect to some other operator, and thus cannot be construed as rigid designators. Here are two attested examples from English literature.

- (20) Wherefore art thou Romeo?³
- (21) I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.⁴

In (20), Juliet is lamenting the fact that her new lover's name is preventing them from being together. She is wondering why he is Romeo. But if names are rigid

³ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*. Act II, Scene 2.

⁴ quotation attributed to Virginia Woolf.

designators, then there can be no world in which the referent of *thou* is anything but Romeo, and the sentence would be meaningless. In (21), *Anon* is being used as a proper name. But the referent of the name varies from poem to poem. This would be impossible if names were always rigid designators.

Another example, culled from the World Wide Web⁵:

(22) Interviewer: Who is your favorite fighter? Dennis Hopper: Muhammad Ali when he was Cassius Clay.

But if Muhammad Ali was ever Cassius Clay, he would have to always be Cassius Clay in every world, if names were always rigid designators.

Sentence (23) is a constructed example.

(23) A: I know three people, named "Mary", "John" and "Jehosephat"B: Jehosephat must get funny looks when he introduces himself.

Here, A has not referred to any people; she has merely made an existential statement of the form *there are three people, x, y and z, such that*... Thus, B cannot have any person in mind. He means something like "the person you mentioned named 'Jehosephat', whoever he is". Again, this use of the name is incompatible with the idea that names are always rigid designators.

So although normally it is pragmatically odd for proper names to take narrow scope with respect to other operators, it is possible on occasion for them to do so. Such examples not only increase the plausibility of the current proposal for how to treat proper names, they provide counter examples for picture's such as Kripke's which depend upon proper names being rigid designators.

⁵ http://observer.guardian.co.uk/osm/story/0,,1580353,00.html

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a theory of proper names whereby their meanings are like the meanings of definite descriptions. In particular, the name *N* has a meaning similar to the description *the thing that bears the name 'N'*. I showed how it accounts for Frege's puzzle of identity statements involving proper names, and how it accounts for both rigid and non-rigid uses of proper names. I defended the theory against Frege's criticism that such a solution is a mere meta-linguistic one; against all of Kripke's criticisms of descriptivist accounts of names in general, and in particular against Kripke's criticism of this specific theory that it is circular.

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