

(III) THE SEMANTIC ARGUMENT

A definite description typically picks out an individual by picking out *unique features* of that person. So, e.g. "The president of the US" picks out Donald Trump because there is one and only one person who has the property of being a current president of the US. Kripke's last argument attacks the idea that there is always some description *D* such that

- (i) Speakers in a community generally know the truth of "*N* is *D*" for a name *N*, where
- (ii) *D* *uniquely* picks out the bearer of *N*.

Why might (ii) fail?

- (A) *D* picks out *too many people*. (Example: "Richard Feynman", where typical *D* = "physicist at Princeton").
- (B) *D* picks out *nobody*. (Example: "Moses", where typical *D* comprises relevant biblical information, also "Einstein"/"Theory of Relativity" which may be inter-defined, and so lead to circularity).
- (C) *D* picks out the *wrong person*. (Example: fictional case of "Gödel", where *D* = "the prover of the incompleteness theorems", or "Peano" where *D* = "the person who discovered the Peano Axioms")

So a final argument might look like this:

- Premise 1: If the semantic value of a name *N* is the same as a definite description *D*, then people who understand the meaning of the name *N* should know that "*N* is *D*" is true.
- Premise 2: If the semantic value of a name *N* is the same as a definite description *D*, then *D* should be true of exactly one person: the person named by *N*.
- Premise 3: Many names *N* refer to persons other than the individuals uniquely picked out by *any* descriptions *D* such that speakers who understand the meaning of *N* know "*N* is *D*" is true.
- Conclusion: The semantic value of a name cannot be the same as that of a definite description.

Millianism

Kripke's arguments led to a revival of Millianism (though Kripke hedged on whether to endorse this view).

Millianism: the semantic value of a name is (just) its actual bearer.

But the Millian still faces all our challenges:

- (1) Problem of explaining intensional belief report contexts.
- (2) Problem of informative identities.
- (3) Problem of negative existentials.

Two (combinable) strategies for resolving these difficulties:

(A) "Bite the bullet". Claim that if Lois believes Clark Kent flies but believes Superman does not then she believes a *contradiction* (like Superman flies and he doesn't). The problem is then to explain why some contradictory beliefs are not 'rationally transparent'

(B) Appeal to "pragmatics". Sometimes we convey more information than we literally assert (e.g. when we imply things). Maybe sometimes we state a trivial falsehood, but *imply* different, true information. This might help with (1) and (2).

Back to Metasemantics

So far we've seen some constraints on answers to the semantic question (1). Millianism and Descriptivism are answers to this question. What about (2), our question in metasemantics?

- (1) What is the semantic value of a name?
- (2) What *determines* the semantic value of a name?

Kripke noted that Descriptivism is attractive because it not only supplies an answer to the semantic question, but also provides answers to the question of what connects a name to its bearer (the connection is again in the satisfaction of a description). So the metasemantic question is especially pressing for the Millian. On the Millian there *is no* descriptive content associated with a name. So what does the work of connecting a name to its bearer?

Kripke provided an alternative view, on which we think of a name as something with a kind of "life cycle". A name starts out its life in a kind of ceremony Kripke dubs a "baptism". At this event, a name is conventionally associated with its bearer in one of two main ways:

- (A) Ostensively: by pointing to or otherwise demonstrating a bearer as one names it.
- (B) By Description: by stipulating that a name is to be used for whatever satisfies some description D.

The first kind of ceremony might be natural when a baby is born. The second might occur when we need a name for someone who we can't demonstrate. For example, police might say "from now on let's call the individual who committed all these heinous crimes "Jack the Ripper"".

This ceremony just *begins* the life of a name. Afterwards the use, and competence with the use, of a name is *passed along* from language user to language user. So people who witnessed the baptism go on to use the name, others hear this and start to use the name themselves (for example, to ask questions about the bearer). Then these individuals in turn pass along the use of the name to others.

In this process very little *descriptive* information about the bearer may be passed along. Or misinformation might be passed along. It may simply be that you hear someone else use the name once.

To illustrate how little descriptive information might be conveyed, Kripke gives the example of "Moses". It seems like it could be the case that none of the information about Moses from the bible were true. Nonetheless, it still seems like Moses might have existed, and if so that we might be able to talk about him even though nothing ties our present uses to Moses except via a causal chain.

This theory (in its broad outlines) is called the *causal-historical theory of reference*.