A note on names and descriptions

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In “Identity and Necessity” and elsewhere, an important part of Saul Kripke’s argument that identity statements are necessary – albeit one overlooked by the descriptivist/Millian debate – is that there is a real distinction between names and descriptions (Kripke 76). In this essay, I intend to show that 1) much of Kripke’s thesis as he puts it forth hangs on this distinction; and that 2) the distinction itself is unwarranted.

Kripke’s main argument against Russell’s claim that names are just descriptions is one from common sense. Although Kripke never makes his argument entirely explicit, it seems to be as follows:

1. If names were descriptions, then it would be the case that, when they cease to satisfy their descriptive role, they could no longer be predicated of the things of which they are predicated.
2. But names *do* continue to be predicated of the thing regardless of whether they continue to satisfy the conditions for which they were first named.
3. Therefore, names are different from descriptions. [1, 2, MT]

For example, the English city of Dartmouth was first given its name, presumably, because it was once a city at the mouth of the river Dart. But the river Dart has shifted such that its mouth is no longer at the city named ‘Dartmouth.’ But this does not mean that Dartmouth is no longer Dartmouth. It merely means that the river has moved slightly. Such a claim, implies Kripke, can only make sense if names are different from descriptions.

For another example, ‘Hesperus’ is the name for Venus as it appears in the evening. But, says Kripke, if Hesperus is Venus (a statement of identity), then *necessarily* Hesperus is Venus (he works this out earlier in the article by combining the laws of necessary self-identity and Leibniz’s law), and the statement “Hesperus could have been another heavenly body” is a false as the claim that Venus could have been something other than Venus (75).

Kripke argues that many of the most popular examples of contingent identity statements rest on a fundamental confusion: they “misconstrue the relation between a *name* and a *description used to fix its reference*,” taking them to be synonyms (82).

Ultimately, Kripke’s claim that the above is a confusion is itself confused. He begins with the presupposition that ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ is a statement about identity where ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ are names, and not descriptions, of the same heavenly body. Later in the article, he claims that those who advocate a view of contingent identity have failed to make this same distinction. These claims are mutually supporting, but neither serves as a strong reason to adopt the other.

Here, I would like to distinguish two questions. The first is, “Does the Kripkean solution work on a *prescriptive* level?” The second is “does the Kripkean system accurately describe the way that we talk about and understand the world?”

In answer to the first, I think that it does. One *can* employ this distinction between naming and describing at will and everything, albeit with some violence, will fall out accordingly. For instance, if one claims that ‘Hesperus’ is a name, then it does follow that necessarily Hesperus is Phosphorus. If one claims that Hesperus is a description, then Hesperus is not necessarily identical to Venus. Either way, the necessity of identity statements is preserved.

But I think that while Kripke’s solution passes the first test, it fails the second. The rest of this article will be devoted to describing how this is the case.

Consider the following examples:

1. Two-Face meets Saul Kripke in a dark alley. Kripke says, “Hey, I know you. You’re Harvey Dent.” Two-Face responds, “Harvey Dent died the night that the body of Rachel Dawes was turned to ash. Now only Two-Face lives.”
2. God makes a covenant with Abram, saying “neither shall thy name be called anymore Abram; but thou shalt be called Abraham.”
3. Rachel is dying while in labor. In her anguish, she cries out that her son’s name shall be ‘Benonai,’ that is, ‘Son of my Sorrow.’ The father of the child, Jacob, contradicts her, and instead names the child, ‘Benjamin,’ that is, ‘son of my right hand.’
4. Ashkii (‘boy’) is a young member of the Navajo Native American tribe. He is about to go through a coming-of-age rite of passage. At the completion this rite, the chief of the tribe changes his name to ‘Bidziil’ (‘He is strong’).
5. John is a schizophrenic. Paul is also a schizophrenic. John and Paul inhabit the same body.
6. Kyle gets a sex change. He legally changes his name to Kylie. Bill, his roommate, has moral beliefs that reject his roomate’s recent action. He continues to call him/her Kyle.

While the multiplication of examples may seem like much, these examples are different enough to pose different problems for Kripke, and numerous enough to show that Kripke’s theory, if it is unable to account for these, has a serious problem. Among other things, they show that Kripke’s idea that names are different from descriptions is unable to account for the still widely-practiced phenomenon of name change. The first is much like Kripke’s own example of the name ‘Dartmouth’, but adds to it the problem of a name’s *ceasing* to refer as another is taken on. The second is interesting because according to the story, the name is given at a time where the quality with which it is associated has yet to be instantiated. The third case involves the *rejection* ofa name carrying an apt description in favor of a different one. The fourth involves the enforcement of a sharp boundary where, apart from the ritual context, such enforcement would seem superficial. The fifth requires the descriptive content of distinct names to serve as a *demarcation criterion* in the absence of a material one [i.e. distinct bodies]. The sixth carries information about gender, and thereby also brings with it information about certain viewpoints and practices being or not being tolerable.

In short, let *a* be a name, which at time *t*, ceases to apply to a person *x* and is replaced with name *b*. At time *t+1*, *x* exhibits a response that is averse to you calling him by *a*. Such a response makes most sense only if a name is, in some sense, descriptive. It will not do for Kripke to tell Two-Face that his new name is not really a name, but *merely* a description. This dichotomy will not hold. But for Kripke, if these names are not predicable of the same object *simpliciter*—that is, at all times and places after the name is first imposed (this is what names *do* for Kripke)—then one cannot claim that necessarily Two-Face *is* Harvey Dent.

One possible response that Kripke might elicit is the following. “You’re talking about all these weird worlds where names carry this deep symbolic meaning. This simply isn’t the case in our language. You’re turning this question about what names *are* into a metalinguistic dispute about what names *could be*. You’re trying to define the norm by invoking the exceptions.”

Such a response, however, would not be adequate. All of these examples describe the beliefs and/or practices of a real culture surrounding naming. Since Kripke is unable to discredit these examples as a critique of a distinction between naming and describing, he can, at best, redescribe his distinction as saying something about the current norms of the English language. But this is precisely what Kripke cannot do without leaving the distinction destitute of the ability to do the work that he needs it to do—namely, to show how identity statements are necessary, and ultimately, to use this to undermine materialism.

Let us return to one of our earlier examples: that of Kyle turned Kylie. Kylie’s roommate’s refusal to call her by her new name can only be forceful if it carries a symbolic meaning. In this case, it turns out that the name carries, at the least, very specific information about *gender*. Granted, there may be names, such as ‘Robin’ or ‘Pat’ which are ambiguous regarding gender. But if we change take the example out of English and put it into a language where names are always gendered (e.g. Japanese), the problem becomes even more glaring, because it shows that in certain languages, after such an action, the continuity of a name to its former reference is not merely awkward, but, in some sense, linguistically impossible. Consequentially, it turns out that the Kripkean understanding of a name—that is, some kind of tag that, regardless of the original motive behind its naming, sticks perpetually to its object thereafter—may have nearly as little in common with what the common folk refer to as names as the Russellian notion that the only real ‘names’ are demonstrative nouns referring to immediate sense-data. But it is just on account of its inability to agree with common sense that Kripke argued against the Russellian distinction in the first place. Therefore, by his own criterion, Kripke’s distinction should not be adopted.

In conclusion, names must themselves be descriptive. Otherwise, the astute psychologist would never be able to differentiate between John and Paul above. The only way that Kripkean names can operate in a Kripkean way is if one empties them of every last shread of meaning. But the names themselves resist this treatment.

# References

Kripke, Saul (1971). “Identity and Necessity” in *Philosophical Troubles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-26.

If the paradigm of the Russellian name is the demonstrative ‘this’ That of the Kripkean name is the Social Security number.

Names need not refer to *presently* instantiated properties of what they name: they may refer to past properties, or even merely hoped-for properties, etc.

‘Leo’ is not, and never will be, a lion.