Kripke on Rigid Designation

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In *Naming and Necessity*,[1], Kripke argues against descriptivism for proper names using, in part, his notion of rigid designation:

Definition. A singular term t is a *rigid designator* of an object o if t designates o with respect to all possible states of the world in which o exists, and t does not designate anything other than o with respect to any possible state of the world.

In this paper, I explore Kripke's notion of rigid designation and his modal argument against descriptivism.

First, are names ever rigid designators? Consider a name like "Aristotle". With respect to the actual state of the world, "Aristotle" refers to Aristotle, but surely there are possible states of the world with respect to which Aristotle exists and "Aristotle" refers to someone else. Indeed, surely Aristotle could have been named something else, and the name "Aristotle" could have named someone else, say Plato. But then "Aristotle" fails to designate Aristotle with respect to every possible state of the world in which Aristotle exists, so "Aristotle" is not a rigid designator. Since the name "Aristotle" is arbitrary, this is true for every name.

This argument rests upon a misunderstanding of rigid designation. To say that t is a rigid designator of o is just to say that t designates o under *our* usage of t, with respect to *our* descriptions of all possible states of the world in which o exists, and t never designates anything else under *our* usage of t, with respect to *our* descriptions of all possible states of the world. It is not to say anything about the usage of t with respect to other possible states of the world, by speakers in those possible states of the world.[2] So this argument against rigid designation fails.

[1] [1]

[2] [2], p. 345–6.

Even given this, it might seem like a name can never designate the same object with respect to different possible states of the world because (i) possible states of the world are just possible worlds, and (ii) an object cannot inhabit[3] more than one possible world. So while Aristotle inhabits the actual world and "Aristotle" refers to Aristotle with respect to the actual world, any referent of "Aristotle" with respect to any other possible world must, by (ii), be different from Aristotle. But then "Aristotle" fails to designate the same object with respect to every possible world with respect to which it designates any object at all, so "Aristotle" is not a rigid designator. The most that we can hope to do is specify qualitative similarity criteria the satisfaction of which by an object in another possible world is sufficient for us to designate that object by "Aristotle" with respect to that possible world. Again, since the name "Aristotle" is arbitrary, this is true for every name.

This argument rests upon a misunderstanding about possible states of the world. Claim (i) is false because a possible state of the world is just a maximal description of a way the world could have been, not a concrete world.[4] For example, the actual state of the world is just a maximal description of the actual world, not the actual world itself. A description can make reference to objects in the actual world, so in this way objects can inhabit more than one possible state of the world, and we can rigidly designate an object with respect to all possible states of the world in which it exists. So this argument against rigid designation also fails.[5]

Kripke argues against two descriptivist theses:

Strong Descriptivism. *The meaning of a name n for a speaker s at a time t is given by a definite description D [or a conjunction of descriptions, or a cluster of descriptions] that s associates with n at t.*

[3] An object can inhabit a possible world without existing at every time in that possible world. For example, Aristotle inhabits the actual world, although Aristotle does not currently exist in the actual world because he is currently dead.

[4] [2], p. 355.

[5] Note even if (i) is true and there are other possible worlds, it is not clear that (ii) is true. For example, does the number 2 fail to inhabit other possible worlds? If so, how do we understand the necessity of mathematical truths about 2? It seems like there might be reason to suppose that an object can inhabit multiple possible worlds, even if possible worlds are understood as concrete entities of some sort.

Weak Descriptivism. *The reference of a name n for a speaker s at a time t is semantically fixed by a definite description D [or a conjunction of descriptions, or a cluster of descriptions] that s associates with n at t*.[6]

Under strong descriptivism, names are *synonymous* with descriptions, so substitution of a name for its description in a sentence should preserve the meaning and proposition expressed, and hence also the modal and epistemic profiles of that proposition.[7] This means that the original sentence and the resulting sentence should express propositions which are jointly necessary or jointly contingent, and jointly apriori or jointly aposteriori (because they are one and the same proposition). But Kripke argues that substitution does *not* preserve the modal profile because names are always rigid designators while the descriptions conventionally associated with names are not rigid designators (this is his *modal argument*). For example, consider the name "Aristotle". If "Aristotle" is synonymous with, say, "the teacher of Alexander the Great", then the following two sentences should express propositions with the same modal profile:

(1) "Aristotle was Aristotle, if Aristotle existed."

(2) "Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander the Great, if Aristotle existed."

But (1) and (2) do *not* express propositions with the same modal profile, since that expressed by (1) is necessary while that expressed by (2) is contingent. There are no possible states of the world in which Aristotle exists and fails to be self-identical, but there are possible states of the world in which Aristotle exists and fails to be the teacher of Alexander the Great (for example, possible states of the world in which Aristotle exists but Plato teaches Alexander the Great). In determining the modal profile of the proposition expressed by (1), we consider whether, with respect to any other state of the world, our Aristotle exists and fails to be self-identical, while in determining the modal profile of the proposition expressed by (2), we consider whether, with respect to any other state of the world, our Aristotle exists and fails to teach Alexander the Great uniquely. This difference reflects the fact that "Aristotle" is a rigid designator, while "the teacher

[6] In what follows, I ignore conjunctions and clusters of descriptions, for simplicity.

[7] This does not include substitution in contexts involving direct quotation.

of Alexander the Great" is not a rigid designator. Of course, this argument is not specific to "Aristotle", and applies to any name.

Kripke's modal argument does not apply to weak descriptivism, because under weak descriptivism there is no assumption of synonymy of names and descriptions, and hence no assumption that names can be freely substituted for descriptions. But Kripke's other arguments, his *epistemic argument* and his *semantic argument*, do apply. Speakers can successfully use names to refer to objects without any beliefs about definite descriptions, or with incorrect beliefs about definite descriptions, contrary to weak descriptivism. (I will not go into details.)

A descriptivist might respond to Kripke's argument by *rigidifying* descriptions. Specifically, the speaker might propose that every name is synonymous with a rigidified definite description of the form ⌜the x such that actually $F(x)$⌝, where this description is understood to designate an object o with respect to a possible state w of the world if and only if o is the only object existing in w satisfying F with respect to the actual state α of the world. If there is only one object satisfying F with respect to α, then the rigidified description for F is a rigid designator because, by definition, it designates that object with respect to every possible state of the world in which it designates anything.[8] Note, however, if there are *multiple* objects satisfying F with respect to α and a possible state w of the world in which only one of those objects exists, then the rigidified description for F is *not* a rigid designator, because it fails to designate an object with respect to α (failure of uniqueness), but designates an object with respect to w. One might instead propose that the rigidified description for F designate an object o with respect to a possible state w of the world if and only if o exists in w and o is the only object satisfying F with respect to α.[9] Indeed, this is a rigid designator for any F.[10]

Kripke's modal argument does not refute this rigidified form of strong descriptivism, but his epistemic and semantic arguments do. Note (1) expresses a proposition that is knowable apriori, while

[8] This is probably false in light of considerations mentioned in [2], p. 340, footnote 4.

[9] The difference here is that o is assumed to be the only object satisfying F with respect to α, not just the only object in w satisfying F with respect to α. This condition is stronger.

[10] This is probably also false.

(3) "Aristotle was the actual teacher of Alexander the Great, if Aristotle existed."

expresses a proposition that is only knowable aposteriori. So substitution even of rigidified descriptions does not preserve the epistemic profile, and hence names cannot be synonymous with rigidified descriptions. Also, speakers can successfully use names without any beliefs about rigidified descriptions, or with incorrect beliefs about rigidified descriptions, so even the rigidified form of weak descriptivism fails.

References

[1] Kripke, S. *Naming and Necessity*. Blackwell, 1981.

[2] Soames, S. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, Vol II. Princeton, 2003.