Has Kripke refuted Russell?

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IN THE SECOND lecture of his famous *Naming and Necessity*[1] S. Kripke offers a list of arguments against the description theory of naming. I will indicate briefly why none of them is conclusive. The arguments in *Naming and Necessity* are directed against the cluster theory of meaning, but for Kripke this is only a variation of the description theory. I will therefore change the wording where necessary in order to obtain arguments against the "simple" description theory. By a description theory I mean any theory of language which allows the elimination of proper names along the lines cited in Russell's "On Denoting".

The first weapon against the description theory is the non-circularity condition (C):

[1] Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980. The references in the text, unless otherwise indicated, are to this edition.

(C) For any successful theory, the account must not be circular. The properties which are used in the description must not themselves involve the notion of reference in such a way that it is ultimately impossible to eliminate.

Now, condition (C) cannot be clearer than the notion of reference itself, whose meaning in turn will depend on a theory of reference. But Kripke offers only a picture, not a theory, for what goes on when one refers with the help of a proper name to a thing or person (a picture which, by the way violates (C), as is frankly admitted by Kripke), so that it is strictly impossible to understand (C). To do this we have therefore to look at the examples that are given for the violation of this condition. There is first the description "the man called 'Socrates'", which is used by W. Kneale (according to Kripke) to explain the meaning of the word "Socrates". Kripke says that the description involves the relation of calling and that it is really this relation that determines the reference and not any description like "the man called 'Socrates'" (p. 70). This is a very strange argument. First: in the description theory it is only the existential quantifier which can be said to refer, and not the predicate. One can hardly demand that this quantifier should be eliminated because this quantifier occurs in every description, whether it contains "vicious" predicates or not. Second: the appearance of "viciousness" in "to call" is due to the fact that one can construct with this verb predicates for unit classes ("to be called 'X'"). You cannot prohibit the use of such predicates without further arguments, otherwise you might as well demand that a description may not refer in order to refer—no wonder that even Kripke isn't able to satisfy his own condition! Third and last: in the sentence "Socrates is the man called 'Socrates'", the first occurrence of "Socrates" is a word used and the second a word mentioned. If you pay attention to this distinction (which did not escape Kripke), you see that the sentence in question is not at all tautological and that the appearance of circularity dissolves. A further example for the violation of condition (C) is the description "the man to whom the proof of the incompleteness of arithmetic is commonly attributed". Kripke says that we need some independent criterion for the reference of the name "Gödel" before we can attribute any property to this man. "Otherwise all we will be

saying is, 'We attribute this achievement to the man to whom we attribute it', without saying who that man is, without giving any independent criterion of the reference, and so the determination will be circular" (p. 89). In this he sees a violation of condition (C). But if you look at (C) you will notice immediately that condition (C), as stated, is not involved here, because (C) is a rule about properties occurring *in* the description, not a rule about the *use* of the description as a whole. If this use is circular, that is another matter. Aside from that, you have to bear in mind that the sentence in question is not trivial; it involves the assertion that a man exists to whom we attribute what we attribute. Compare the note to *14.22 of *Principia Mathematica*:

> As an instance of the above proposition [i.e. *14.22], we may take the following: "The proposition 'the author of Waverley existed' is equivalent to 'the man who wrote Waverley wrote Waverley.'" Thus such a proposition as "the man who wrote Waverley wrote Waverley" does not embody a logically necessary truth, since it would be false if Waverley had not been written, or had been written by two men in collaboration. For example, "the man who squared the circle squared the circle" is a false proposition.

What is there to say to Kripke's claim that we should have an independent criterion of reference in order to start with attribution? This may sound conclusive, but you have to show the possibility of doing this; otherwise the argument is simply a *petitio principii*. Now in footnote 42 on page 96, Kripke states that it is especially the fact "that we can often use names of famous figures of the past who are long dead and with whom no living person is acquainted" which "cannot be correctly explained by a description theory". One wonders to what the "independent criterion of reference" applies *now* when we attribute to Plato the property of being a philosopher. Kripke says nothing on this point except the triviality that the name in question was *once* used to refer to the living philosopher, but nobody will deny this, let alone the description theorist.

The non-circularity condition (C) turned out to be a blunt weapon. Let's look at the others. Kripke formulates six theses which, he thinks, follow from the description theory and then

formulates objections to five of them. The first thesis is:

(1) To every name or designating expression "*X*" there corresponds a cluster of properties, namely the family of those properties ϕ such that *A* believes "ϕX".

In what follows "*A*" designates always the user of the name "*X*". Kripke regards (1) as a definition. Here it becomes obvious that he tries to defeat only a variation of the description theory. In this variation it is important what the speaker believes to be the case, but there are other variations, in particular the one in which only what is actually the case counts, independently of what the speaker believes. So the description theory as such is not in question here. But in every variation of the description theory (1) is correct. Because if for *A* "*X*" is a name, then the cluster of properties corresponding to this name contains automatically "'*X*' is a name of ...". We have seen that condition (C) is not sufficient to exclude this property from the cluster so that the assertion of existence involved in (1) is always fulfilled. The second thesis is:

(2) One of the properties, or some conjointly, are believed by *A* to pick out some individual uniquely.

This assertion is not trivial, particularly if the second of the above variations of the description theory is taken. Then (2) becomes the assertion that to every two individuals there exists a property which applies to the one and not to the other. This is the well-known principle of the identity of indiscernibles, acceptance of which would at least deserve discussion.[2] But if indiscernibles are not identical, then every theory of naming will get into inextricable difficulties, especially when the bearers of the proper names

[2] The reader should be mindful of the difficulties Russell had with the definition of points or particulars. (*Cf. Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits*, Chapter VIII of Part 4, "The Principle of Individuation", but also *The Monist*, 25 [1915]: 212–33, "On the Experience of Time"—where the principle in question is accepted on empirical and not on logical grounds.) The reader should also be mindful of the controversy with Wittgenstein and Ramsey on the topic of identity (a recurring theme in Russell's later writings).

are long dead, so that there is no possibility of using demonstratives. Kripke likes to speak about a chain of reference going back to the referent, but such talk is useless if you don't know how to fix this chain in the present. (The case would be otherwise if we had time-machines—but this belongs to the science fiction part of possible world semantics.) As long as Kripke offers no solution to the problem how to refer to two indiscernible but different persons of the past he himself is obliged to hold on to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles.

But anyway Kripke's argument doesn't point in this direction. He tries to refute (2) with reference to the famous "man in the street" who normally doesn't have enough knowledge to describe the bearer of the name uniquely. (Note that this objection concerns only Kripke's variation of description theory!) The importance of condition (C) is obvious here because the description "the man called '*X*'" is all that is needed for unambiguous reference, provided that each name has only one bearer. But this is exactly the thesis Kripke wants to defend against the description theory. Since his claim is that proper names even designate the same person in all possible worlds, he too has to make the simplification and disregard ambiguous proper names. (See pages 7–9 on this point.)

(3) If the description applies to a single object *y*, then *y* is the referent of '*X*'.

Kripke argues: if somebody believes that Columbus was the first man to realize that the earth was round, then—given this thesis and given the fact that some Greek had discovered the globular shape of our planet—he really refers to some Greek if he uses the term "Columbus". But this is simply false and therefore the description theory cannot be right (p. 85).

Let's look at this objection a little closer. Where does the error of the speaker lie? From the point of view of the description theory he believes that one and only one man was both called "Columbus" *and* was the first to realize that the earth was round. From the simple fact that this belief is wrong it is impossible to decide which part of the conjunction is false. It seems to me, therefore, that two answers are *prima facie* possible: the speaker calls wrongly some

Greek (say Parmenides) "Columbus", or the speaker attributes the wrong property to Columbus. The decision of Kripke rests of course on his own theory, but this can hardly be called an argument. Moreover, as soon as both properties are taken into account one sees immediately that the description does not refer wrongly but—because there is no individual in the universe which satisfies both properties—does not refer at all!

Kripke's argument works only on the assumption that the property of being called "Columbus" is not allowed to occur in a description (for which, as was shown above, he offers no conclusive reason) and that the properties used are only believed to be satisfied by the referent and are not actually satisfied by him. His objection concerns therefore only his own variation of the description theory, but even this it fails to refute because somebody who uses the description "discoverer of the globular shape of the earth" to refer to Columbus would simply withdraw this description once he had learned that Columbus was not the one who discovered this fact. The possibility of error can therefore be disregarded. Kripke cannot forbid this, because he uses the same strategy to justify his claim that proper names apply only to one person. To use his own example: suppose you mistake Jones for Smith because you cannot exactly remember their faces. If you say therefore to Smith "Good evening Mr. Jones", you are really talking to Smith, of course. But you cannot argue from this—so Kripke defends himself—that the proper name "Jones" is ambiguously used (once for Jones and once for Smith) because you will surely withdraw your statement as soon as you become informed about the identity of your "*vis-à-vis*". (Compare footnote 3, page 25 and footnote 36, page 85). Given the possibility of it being withdrawn, the objection to thesis (3) cannot hold good.

There is a related argument in footnote 37 on page 87. Kripke says there: "if a Gödelian fraud were exposed, Gödel would no longer be called the 'author of the incompleteness theorem' but he would still be called 'Gödel'. The description, therefore, does not abbreviate the name." But it is easy to draw a contrary conclusion from this thought experiment, which is in accordance with the description theory: it is better to use in the description the property "to be called 'Gödel'" than "to be the author of the incompleteness theorem". One can easily agree with this, but it is

nothing new to the cautious description theorist.

To the fourth thesis of the description theory, Kripke offers no new arguments (as he himself states on page 86), so we can go over to the fifth thesis:

(5) The statement 'If X exists, then the description applies to X' is known a priori by the speaker.

Kripke distinguishes between "a priori" and "necessary". "A priori" is for him a notion of epistemology and applies to a sentence which is known to be true independently of any experience (pp. 35–6). The "refutation" of thesis (5) consists in the argument that the speaker A only believes that the description applies to X—he may be in error and therefore it is impossible to call the statement in question an a priori truth. Once again the objection concerns only a variation of the description theory, but it fails even to refute this variation. To see this one has to enter into the question of existence, which unfortunately is not fully discussed by Kripke. He refers on page 158 to "a forthcoming work" treating "the problems of existential statements, empty names, and fictional entities". This remark shows the world of difference that exists between Kripke's philosophical outlook and Russell's, who acknowledges neither empty names (therefore the notion of "*logically* proper name"), nor fictional entities (at least no *true* statements about them). To everyone who knows about the mutual dependence of philosophical concepts and philosophical systems, it should not be surprising to hear that the notion of existence is not the same for the two philosophers. Moreover, there is for Russell an intimate connection between the theory of descriptions and questions of existence (which concerns the role that proper names play in his ontology). Thus one cannot criticize the former from the standpoint of a wholly different concept of existence without a well-founded criticism of the latter. But this is just what Kripke does. According to the description theory, only something described can be said to exist and not something immediately given[3] (except when the object is described as im-

[3] Compare *Principia Mathematica*, p. 174f.

mediately given).[4] As is clear from the context, it is the description necessary to make the existence claim which, according to Kripke, cannot be known a priori by the speaker to apply to the object in question. (What else could be a thesis of the description theory?)

The crucial point lies in the fact that the a priori statement is an hypothetical conditional. Such conditionals can be known a priori precisely because they remain true when the antecedent is discovered to be false. (It is this possibility that Kripke has in mind when he argues that the speaker may be in error.) As a matter of fact, the statement follows logically from the theory of descriptions, as is shown in *Principia Mathematica*, *14.22, and as a logically true statement it can surely be known a priori. It seems incredible that Kripke is not aware of that. Indeed, he sees the counter-argument but supposes, without discussion, that one can make an existence claim without saying that what exists has a certain property. (See page 110.) Then of course his objection is tenable, because under this assumption the statement in question ceases to be deducible—but it seems to me that it also ceases to be a thesis of the description theory (if you can separate the notion of existence from it). Kripke's assertion is equivalent to the contention discussed above that you should first refer simply to the person you speak about because only afterwards are you able to start with attribution. However, as long as he makes no suggestion as to how this is possible in the case of persons long dead the argument is nothing more than a *petitio principii* again. The last thesis in Kripke's list is:

(6) The statement "If *X* exists, then the description applies to *X*" expresses a necessary truth (in the idiolect of the speaker).

"Necessary" is used by Kripke strictly as a notion of metaphysics, so (6) is not an identical claim to (5). If the world could not have been different concerning the fact expressed by the sentence, then this fact about the world is a necessary one. In this explication "mathematical reality" is included, everything concerning it being either necessarily true or necessarily false (pp. 35–6). Now, because the statement in question, as was shown above, is logically

[4] See "The Relation of Sense-data to Physics", *Scientia*, 16 (1914), Section XII.

true, thesis (6) is true for the same reason as is thesis (5) in spite of the subtle distinction Kripke draws between metaphysical and epistemological concepts. (Compare also page 39, where it is said that every analytic statement is both a priori and necessary.) But with this remark we have not answered Kripke because his argument is in fact directed against a completely different thesis (not explicitly formulated by him):[5]

(6') The properties mentioned in the description belong necessarily to the referent of the description.

Now if this were a thesis of the description theory, the case would be really bad. One can argue for (6') that if you substitute "teacher of Alexander" for "Aristotle", then one would have to look in every possible world for the teacher of Alexander to know which of the inhabitants is Aristotle. Whoever he is, he has therefore in every possible world the property of being the teacher of Alexander and this means that he has this property necessarily. To this argument we shall reply that one can of course use descriptions in this way, but then (6') shows that something is wrong—not with the description theory but with the particular use made of it. There is no space here to go into the problem of identity across possible worlds. But according to Kripke himself, it is possible to identify an individual in the actual world and then speak about the occurrence of the very same individual in another possible world. (See pp. 42–7.) All there is to do then, in order to escape from (6') as a thesis of the description theory, is to identify the individual with the help of the description only in the actual world, and not also in the possible world. The remaining problem is one of possible world semantics and not one of the description theory. To state it as untechnically as possible: it may sound like a contradiction to say that possibly the teacher of Alexander is not the teacher of Alexander, and this contradiction underlies (6'). But nothing is wrong with the statement that the man who in fact taught Alexan-

[5] One can even question whether Kripke holds (6') to be a thesis of the description theory, because in *Naming and Necessity* it is Searle, not Kripke, who says that (6') follows from the description theory. But anyway we are concerned with the arguments against the description theory and Kripke certainly connects one with (6').

der could have done otherwise. Kripke himself uses a description operator in this way.[6] So (6') is in no way a (necessary) thesis of the description theory, and therefore none of the many arguments offered in *Naming and Necessity* is conclusive. This is what I promised to show. To avoid misunderstanding, I want to stress that it wasn't my intention to give an overall interpretation of Kripke's work. In particular, I haven't dealt with his distinction between the theory of descriptions as a theory of meaning and as a theory of reference, and also not with the question of how far he intends to involve the historical Russell in his critical remarks.[7] Further, I was solely concerned with the arguments and theses as such and not with the "pictures" that underly them. Perhaps Kripke is right in maintaining that the description theory uses the wrong picture and he the right one.[8] But he surely offers no logical arguments against the description theory. Hence one is not forced to give it up on the ground that it leads to absurdities. Moreover, if variations of the description theory are distinguished, there is strong evidence that Kripke himself offers nothing other than such a variation. But there is no room to go into that question here.

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[6] In "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", *Midwest Studies in Philosohy*, 2 (1977): 255-76, esp. p. 259 and following. Compare also fn. 22, p. 60, of *Naming and Necessity*. The "Dthat"—operator of D. Kaplan, mentioned there, serves the same purpose, see his "Dthat", in *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 9: *Pragmatics* (London, San Francisco, New York: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 221-43, especially p. 238.

[7] On this point Kripke is confusing. For example, in fn. 5 (p. 29) he speaks of Russell as of one who gives a substantive theory of the reference of names; in fn. 44 (p. 97) he states (implicitly) the contrary. But as the founder of the description theory Russell is certainly involved, consciously or unconsciously, in Kripke's attack.

[8] In this connection it is interesting to read D.H. Soles' paper, "Russell's Causal Theory of Meaning", *Russell*, n.s. 1 (1981): 27-37.