

Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*  
Lecture Three

Against Descriptivism

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# Against Descriptivism

Introduction

The Modal Argument

Rigid Designators

The Semantic Argument

The Epistemic Argument

Summary

## Last Lecture: Descriptivism

- Last week we introduced **descriptivism**, which in its simplest form goes like this:
  - (i) Every proper name is synonymous with some definite description
  - (ii) Anyone who understands a proper name knows the definite description it is synonymous with
- We could make descriptivism a bit more plausible (and a lot more complicated) by associating proper names with **clusters** of descriptions, but we will stick to the simpler version of descriptivism for now
- Our discussion of the simpler version also applies to the cluster version

## This Lecture: Objections to Descriptivism

- Descriptivism was probably the dominant view of how names worked in the 70s
- But Kripke offered a number of objections to it (*N&N*: Lecture Two, pp. 71–90), and many philosophers think that these objections were fatal
- Today, philosophers standardly distinguish between three different arguments against descriptivism which Kripke offered:
  - (i) The Modal Argument
  - (ii) The Semantic Argument
  - (iii) The Epistemological Argument
- In this lecture, we will run through all of these arguments, paying special attention to the Modal Argument, which is the most important

## Why Are We Doing This???

- Some of you may be wondering why we are spending all this time talking about descriptivism
- **This is meant to be a metaphysics module!!!**
- Kripke wants to replace descriptivism with a new picture of how names work, and he thinks that this new picture will lead us to interesting **metaphysical** conclusions
- This language-first approach to metaphysics is very common in analytic philosophy, so you can think of *N&N* as a case study of contemporary analytic philosophy
- I'll then leave it to you to decide whether this approach to metaphysics is good or not

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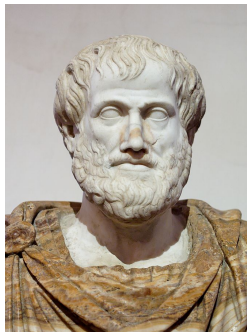
Summary

## Introducing the Modal Argument

- Kripke's first and most important argument against descriptivism is the **Modal Argument**
- In the present context, “modalities” are concepts like *possibly*, *necessarily*, *contingently*...
- In brief, Kripke's objection goes like this:
  - Descriptivism must be false, because it wrongly tells us that certain contingent truths are actually necessarily true

## Applying Descriptivism to 'Aristotle'

- According to descriptivism, 'Aristotle' is synonymous with some definite description. Which one?
- For now, let's suggest: 'the teacher of Alexander'
- That is obviously far too simple a suggestion to really be plausible: amongst other things, Alexander surely had many teachers!
- But let's just pretend that Aristotle was Alexander's one and only teacher, and use this description as our example





## Synonymy and Substitution

- What does it mean to say that 'Aristotle' and 'the teacher of Alexander' are synonymous?
- Well, at the very least, it ought to mean this:
  - If we have two sentences which are exactly the same *except* one of them has the name 'Aristotle' where the other has the definite description 'the teacher of Alexander', then those two sentences **mean exactly the same thing**
- Here is an example of what I have in mind:
  - (1) Aristotle was Macedonian
  - (2) The teacher of Alexander was Macedonian
- If 'Aristotle' and 'the teacher of Alexander' are synonymous, then (1) and (2) must mean the same thing

## A Counter-Example

- But now consider these two sentences:
  - (1) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then Aristotle taught Alexander
  - (2) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
- Do these two sentences mean exactly the same thing?
- Well, they both have the same truth-value: they are both true
- But Kripke thought that there was a **modal** difference between (1) and (2):
  - (1) is only **contingently** true, whereas (2) is **necessarily** true!

## The Contingency of (1)

- (1) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then Aristotle taught Alexander
- (1) is only contingent because there are **possible worlds** in which someone else taught Alexander, instead of Aristotle
  - Imagine that Aristotle got hit in the head when he was 10, and that this stopped him from becoming a great philosopher.
  - In this world, Alexander still wanted to learn about philosophy, and so got a different philosopher, called Bob, to be his teacher
  - So in this world, (1) is false; thus (1) is only **contingently** true

## The Necessity of (2)

- (2) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
- (2) is necessarily true, because in **every possible world** where exactly one person taught Alexander, the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
  - That's because 'the teacher of Alexander' just picks out whoever happens to be the one and only teacher of Alexander in a given world

## The Necessity of (2)

- Consider again the world we described earlier, where Aristotle got hit in the head, and Bob became Alexander's one and only teacher
- In this world, 'the teacher of Alexander' doesn't pick out Aristotle; it picks out Bob!
- So in this world, (2) is still true:
  - (2) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
- 'The teacher of Alexander' picks out Bob, and Bob did teach Alexander

## The Necessity of (2)

- More generally, in any world where exactly one person taught Alexander, the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
- So (2) is true in every world
  - (2) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
- Thus (2) is **necessarily** true

## Putting the Whole Argument Together

- If 'Aristotle' and 'the teacher of Alexander' are synonymous, then these two sentences should mean the same thing:
  - (1) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then Aristotle taught Alexander
  - (2) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
- But (1) and (2) **do not** mean the same thing:
  - (1) is **contingently** true, and (2) is **necessarily** true

## Does this Argument Refute Descriptivism?

- Let's grant that this argument shows that 'Aristotle' is not synonymous with 'the teacher of Alexander'
- Still, that does not yet show that descriptivism is false: there might be some **other** definite description that 'Aristotle' is synonymous with
- After all, we admitted right from the start that 'the teacher of Alexander' was just a simple, but really quite silly, example



## Kripke's Conjecture

- Kripke never definitively shows that 'Aristotle' is not synonymous with **some** definite description
- Instead, Kripke makes the following conjecture:
  - Whatever definite description you suggest is synonymous with 'Aristotle' (or any other proper name), I will always be able to run a version of the Modal Argument just presented
  - There will be **some** contingent sentence which you will wrongly categorise as necessary
- Why is Kripke so confident about this conjecture?
- Because he thinks that the problem we just ran through is a symptom of a deeper difference between names and definite descriptions

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## Introducing Rigid Designators

- In Lecture One of *N&N* (pp. 47–9), Kripke introduces the idea of a **rigid designator**
- Roughly: to say that an expression is a **rigid designator** is to say that it refers to exactly the same object in every world
- For example, to say that 'Aristotle' is a rigid designator is to say that it refers to the very same man, Aristotle himself, in every possible world
- So 'Aristotle' still refers to the man Aristotle, even in a world where he bumped his head, and never became a philosopher, and never taught Alexander

## A Little More Precisely...

- That is the intuitive idea, but we need to add a couple of details
- First **and most importantly**: when we say that 'Aristotle' refers to Aristotle in every world, we are **not** saying that everyone in every world uses 'Aristotle' as a name for Aristotle
  - There are surely worlds where people speak a language in which 'Aristotle' is a name for Plato!
- The idea behind rigid designators is this:
  - When **we** describe other possible worlds, we use **our** language, not the language of the people in that world
  - To say that 'Aristotle' is a rigid designator is to say that no matter what world **we** describe, using **our** language, **our** word 'Aristotle' refers to the same person

## A Little More Precisely...

- Second, and much less important, we need to finesse the definition of 'rigid designator' to deal with the fact that there are some worlds in which Aristotle doesn't exist at all
- In those worlds, 'Aristotle' cannot refer to Aristotle: there is no Aristotle to refer to!
- There are a few different ways of getting around this technical niggle, the most obvious is:
  - To say that 'Aristotle' is a rigid designator is to say that it always refers to the same thing, in any world *where it refers to anything at all*

## The Key Thing to Remember

- But do not let these details confuse you
- The **KEY THING** to remember is:
  - Rigid designators are expressions which refer to the same thing in every world
- As we will see, the idea of rigid designators is one of the most important concepts in *N&N*

## Kripke's Conjecture Revisted

- Now that we have the concept of a **rigid designator**, we can go back to the Modal Argument, and Kripke's conjecture
- Why is Kripke so sure that no matter what description we suggest, he will be able to use his Modal Argument against the suggestion that 'Aristotle' is synonymous with that description?
- Because Kripke thinks that names are **rigid designators**, and descriptions (usually) are not rigid

## Definite Descriptions as Non-Rigid

- It is easy to see that (most) definite descriptions are not rigid: 'the  $F$ ' just picks out whatever happens to be the unique  $F$  in a given world
  - 'The teacher of Alexander' picks out whoever happens to be the teacher of Alexander
  - 'The inventor of television' picks out whoever happens to be the inventor of television
  - 'The president of America' picks out whoever happens to be the president of America
- The general rule of thumb is that definite descriptions pick out different things in different worlds, and so are not rigid



## Proper Names as Rigid

- What is the argument that proper names are rigid?
- Just this: it seems **intuitively right** to say that names are rigid (*N&N*: 49 and 62–3)
- According to Kripke, it is just intuitively correct to say that 'Donald Trump' refers to the very same man in every possible world
- It doesn't matter whether he is president in that world, or hosted the *American Apprentice*, or has silly hair
- No matter **what** Trump is like in a world, 'Donald Trump' still refers to him in that world

## Generalising the Modal Argument

- Consider these two claims:
  - (1) All proper names are rigid
  - (2) All definite descriptions are non-rigid
- If (1) and (2) are both true, then descriptivism must be false
  - We will **always** be able to run a version of the Modal Argument, no matter what name and description we consider
- Unfortunately, although (1) is intuitively true, (2) is false: as Kripke acknowledges, there are *some* rigid descriptions
  - 'The integer between 3 and 4'

## Against the Modal Argument

- Given that there are rigid descriptions, the question becomes:  
Can a descriptivist *always* find a rigid description for every proper name?
- I will not try to fully answer that question, but here is a general strategy a descriptivist might try
- Instead of using 'the teacher of Alexander' in place of 'Aristotle', use 'the **actual** teacher of Alexander'
  - In every world, 'the actual teacher of Alexander' picks out the person who taught Alexander **in the actual world**, i.e. Aristotle
- I'll leave it up to you to decide whether the descriptivist can use descriptions like this to dodge Kripke's Modal Argument

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## Introducing the Semantic Argument

- As well as his Modal Argument, Kripke had another two arguments against descriptivism
  - The Semantic Argument
  - The Epistemic Argument
- In this part of the lecture, we will quickly look at the Semantic Argument

## The Gödel-Schmidt Case

- Kripke (*N&N*:83–4) uses the following example to illustrate his Semantic Argument
- Gödel was a famous mathematician of the 20th Century, and his most famous achievement was proving some results called the Incompleteness Theorems
- All that most people know about Gödel is that he proved these theorems, so it would be natural for a descriptivist to suggest the following:
  - ‘Gödel’ is synonymous with ‘the prover of the Incompleteness Theorems’

## The Gödel-Schmidt Case

- But now imagine the following (fictional!) story:
  - Although everyone *thinks* that Gödel proved the Incompleteness Theorems, he didn't really
  - Really, a man called Schmidt proved it, and then Gödel stole Schmidt's manuscript, killed Schmidt, and published the results under his own name
- Kripke asks the following question: If this story were true, who would the name 'Gödel' refer to: Schmidt or Gödel?

## The Gödel-Schmidt Case

- Kripke says that the answer is obviously that 'Gödel' would still refer to Gödel
  - If this story turned out to be true, and was reported on in the news tomorrow, we wouldn't all say: Oh, so all along we were referring to Schmidt when we used the name 'Gödel'!
- But if 'Gödel' is synonymous with 'the prover of the Incompleteness Theorems', then 'Gödel' would refer to Schmidt in this scenario!
- So 'Gödel' cannot be synonymous with 'the prover of the Incompleteness Theorems'



## The Semantic Argument and the Modal Argument

- There is an obvious similarity between the Semantic Argument and the Modal Argument:
  - Both arguments involve imagining other possible worlds
- But the arguments are also **importantly different**
- As I emphasised earlier, the Modal Argument asks us to consider what **our** name 'Aristotle, the name from **our** language, refers to when we describe different possible worlds
- The Semantic Argument asks us to consider what 'Gödel' would refer to **as used by people in different possible worlds**

## Generalising the Semantic Argument

- So far, all that the Semantic Argument shows is that 'Gödel' isn't synonymous with 'the prover of the Incompleteness Theorems'
- This does not yet count as a refutation of descriptivism: 'Gödel' might be synonymous with **another** description
- To get to a refutation of descriptivism, we must assume that we could run the Semantic Argument on **any** description we might suggest as synonymous with 'Gödel'
- I'll leave it up to you to decide whether the Semantic Argument can be applied so widely

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## Introducing the Epistemic Argument

- Descriptivism has two components:
  - (i) Every proper name is synonymous with some definite description
  - (ii) Anyone who understands a proper name knows the definite description it is synonymous with
- Both the Modal and Semantic Arguments have attacked (i)
- The Epistemic Argument (*N&N*: 87) attacks (ii)

## Back to Aristotle and the Teacher of Alexander

- Consider the following two sentences (again):
  - (1) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then Aristotle taught Alexander
  - (2) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
- Earlier we pointed out one important difference between (1) and (2): (1) is contingently true and (2) is necessarily true
- But here is another important difference: (1) is a **posteriori** true, but (2) is a **priori** true
  - To know that (1) is true, you need to know about the history of the world; but to know that (2) is true, you just need to think it through

## The Epistemic Argument

- But now suppose that 'Aristotle' is synonymous with 'the teacher of Alexander', and everyone who understands the name 'Aristotle' knows this
- In that case, anyone who understands 'Aristotle' knows that these two sentences are synonymous:
  - (1) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then Aristotle taught Alexander
  - (2) If exactly one person taught Alexander, then the teacher of Alexander taught Alexander
- But if someone knew that (1) and (2) were synonymous, then they could convert their a priori knowledge of (2) into a priori knowledge of (1)
- Since we cannot know (1) a priori, that must mean that understanding 'Aristotle' is not a matter of knowing that it is synonymous with 'the teacher of Alexander'

## Generalising the Epistemic Argument

- This does not yet count as a refutation of descriptivism: understanding 'Aristotle' might still be a matter of knowing that it is synonymous with a **different** description
- To get to a refutation of descriptivism, we must assume that we could run the Semantic Argument no matter which description we suggest
- I'll leave it up to you to decide whether the Semantic Argument can be applied so widely

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## The Key Things to Remember

- Here are the **KEY THINGS** to remember about Kripke's arguments against descriptivism
- Kripke had three objections
  - The Modal Argument
  - The Semantic Argument
  - The Epistemic Argument
- For our purposes, the most important argument is the Modal Argument
  - The point of the Modal Argument is that descriptivism must be false, because it turns certain contingent truths into necessary ones
  - There may be ways for a descriptivist to respond to this argument, but I'll leave that up to you

## The Key Things to Remember

- The other **KEY THING** to remember is what it means to call an expression a **rigid designator**
- Rigid designators are expressions which refer to the same thing in every world