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THE ORIGINS OF SAUL KRIPEK

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Paul W. Humphreys and James H. Fetzer, editors

THE NEW THEORY OF REFERENCE: Kripke, Marcus and its origins

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Saul Kripke, Oxford, (1990); from Steve Pike’s Philosophers (Cornerstone)

key words without comment), disingenuous elliptism and simplification, obfuscation, the misleading use of dates, diachronic inanities, uncritical and selective appeals to personal recollection, and, perhaps most importantly, an apparent attempt to understand ideas that no historian could possibly take seriously. Smith claims that Soames and Burgess are involved in a “fraid” or “vendetta” against him—or at least claims that “several people” (unnamed) see matters this way.

The stated objective of Smith’s original paper was to give proper credit to Marcus, any damage to Kripke being seemingly collateral; but in his subsequent papers, Smith’s plain statement seems not merely to misunderstand Marcus’s position but also to misunderstand the fact that Kripke might take offense. Soames is critical of this view, but he is also aware of the possibility that Marcus’s contributions to the philosophy of language could be considered as having a significant impact on the development of linguistic theory.

The absence of logical notation or other formalism largely detracts from its rigor—philosophical formalisms are, after all, just shorthand for our thinking. The non-modal notion Kripke uses is rigidity: names in sentences used to talk about individuals in the actual world do not alter their references in sentences used to talk about the same individual in other worlds. When they refer rigidly, as Kripke puts it. For example, in the modal sentence “(1) Amelie Earhart might have become a doctor” the name “Amelie Earhart” refers to an individual in the actual world. The modal sentence “(2) Amelie Earhart might have become a doctor” might refer to a different individual in a non-modal world. In short, “Amelie Earhart” refers rigidly to “Amelie Earhart.” By contrast, the description “the first woman to fly the Atlantic” does not—different women satisfy that description in different worlds. (To say that “Amelie Earhart” refers to the same individual in every world is to say nothing about how that expression is used in different worlds.)

The importance of the notion of rigidity was not properly appreciated until the 1960s. As a graduate student at Harvard, Marcus read Kripke. Kripke had presented a doctoral thesis on logic and modal logic under the supervision of W. V. Quine. According to Quine, modal logic was utilitarian. It was used to avoid violating what we might call the principle of respectable logic: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other name would smell as sweet.” So Quine would, were he not Rome’s Caliban. “I think that the idea of using different names for the same object is spurious.”

In logic, Juliet’s point becomes the Principle of Substitutivity: the truth (or falsity) of a sentence about X must depend on what X is named, on how X is specified in that sentence. Venus, whether we call it “Venus”, “Morning Star”, or “Evening Star”, is the planet between Earth and Mercury, and it would take more than linguistic stipulation to change that fact. The Principle of Substitutivity says that swapping names of the same object preserves truth. The non-modal sentences (3) and (4) are either both true or both false: (3) Morning Star = Morning Star (4) Morning Star = Evening Star. But the modal sentences (5) and (6) appear to violate Substitutivity: Marcus, Morning Star (Marcus, Morning Star); Marcus, Morning Star (Mars, Morning Star); Marcus, Morning Star (6) is true because every statement that is logically true (or logically necessary). (5) is false because the statement “Marcus = B” is logically true (“A” and “B” are distinct names, possibly of the same object). From Substitutivity failures in modal sentences, Quine drew paradoxical consequences for the modal systems of Carnap and Marcus.

Fellwald and Kripke were confident that Quine’s objections could be overcome, and they gravitated towards a common position on how the analogues of names worked in modal systems. In his technical work, Marcus had already proposed variables analogues of the cross-explanatory pronouns— as referring rigidly (although he did not introduce the label “rigid”—until 1970). Fellwald argued in his dissertation that “genuine names” in modal logic must also be rigid. By this criterion, “Iter” is a genuine name, but the “planet between Earth and Mercury” is not. The relevant part of Fellwald’s work was not published; it involves the study of various technical issues already in their own work. In 1963, Kripke introduced a new conception of possible worlds and
an accompanying semantics that quickly became the industry standard. The development of Kripke’s semantics and its relation to the notion of “possible worlds” is discussed in detail in Brandt’s article.

By 1964, Kripke had turned to underlying philosophical issues about language and modality. He argued that the modal concepts of possibility and necessity were best understood in terms of a modal logic, and he developed a theory of possible worlds, which he called Kripke’s theory of possible worlds. Kripke’s theory of possible worlds is based on the idea that there are many possible worlds, each of which is a maximal set of facts.

Philosophy

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A name is rigid if it refers to the same object in every metaphysically possible world in which that object exists. The rigidity of names is a key assumption in Kripke’s semantics. It guarantees that a name is rigid if and only if it refers to the same object in all possible worlds.

Some philosophers, notably Quine, followed Russell in maintaining that names abbreviate descriptions. Others, notably Seurat, Strawson, and Wittgenstein, held that names refer but have their references fixed by descriptions (or clusters of descriptions). Find whoever satisfies the first woman to fly the Atlantic and you have found the reference of “Amelia Earhart.”

It is egregiously wrong to claim, as Richard C. Kripke does (London Review of Books, 1980), that Kripke denounced the Theory of Descriptions. Kripke invoked the Theory of Descriptions and defended it in print in 1977. His complaint was with descriptive theories of names that were too rigid and assumed that names were rigid.

Kripke did not work in a vacuum. Descriptive theories of names had been under strain in some time. In 1947-8, Arthur Smullyan had spotted asymmetries between names and descriptions in modal sentences: (7) “The first woman to fly the Atlantic” is justifiable. True, (8) “which the first woman to fly the Atlantic (in that world) did not fly the Atlantic (in that world)” is false. The first woman to fly the Atlantic (in that world) did not fly the Atlantic (in that world). (10) “The first woman to fly the Atlantic is 200 years old.” The first woman to fly the Atlantic (in that world) is 200 years old. (10) “The first woman to fly the Atlantic is 200 years old.” The first woman to fly the Atlantic (in that world) is 200 years old.

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