Causal Theories of Names

Benjamin Marschall

Lecture II

The Meter Stick Revisited

Suppose we introduce the expression 'one meter' and determine its reference as follows:

'one meter' is to refer to the length of a certain stick S at time t_0

What, then, is the status of

(MS) The length of stick S at t_0 is one meter [= The stick S is one meter long at t_0]

According to Kripke, it is *contingent* but *a priori*.

<u>Why Contingent?</u>

'one meter' *rigidly* refers to a certain length. It thus denotes the same length in every possible world.

'the length of stick S at t_0' is a *non-rigid* designator. It can denote different lengths in different possible worlds.

We need to make the following assumption: the length of the stick S is not one of its *essential properties*. This means that the *very same* stick S could have been shorter or longer than it is.

[This seems quite plausible: temperature changes can affect the length of objects, arguably without turning them into different objects altogether.]

In contrast, length *is* an essential properties of lengths. This might sound weird because we don't usually think of lengths as objects. But if one does, then we presumably would not want that a length can expand / contract and still be the same length.

<u>Why A Priori?</u>

Is (MS) a priori for everyone who understands the expression 'one meter'?

That seems wrong, because one can arguably understand what a meter is without knowing how the expression was introduced.

I think Kripke's point is that (MS) is a priori only *for the person* who has introduced the term by fixing the length of a meter in terms of the stick.

<u>Upshot</u>

Slightly esoteric, but the underlying thought is both simple and plausible: If we introduce 'one meter' by means of a stick, and the stick subsequently contracts or expands, we do not revise our measurements.

From Kripke to Evans

Kripke did not give a rigorous causal *theory* of names with necessary and sufficient conditions. Not just because he was "sort of too lazy at the moment" (*NN* 93), but also because he thought that we first need to replace the completely misguided *picture* underlying the description theory with something more plausible.

> The picture which leads to the cluster-of-descriptions theory is something like this: One is isolated in a room; the entire community of other speakers, everything else, could disappear; and one determines the reference for himself by saying – 'By "Gödel" I shall mean the man, whoever he is, who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic'. (Kripke *NN*, 91)

In his paper "A Causal Theory of Names", Gareth Evans agrees with this aspect of Kripke's approach. He similarly opposes the "curiously popular" philosophy of mind according to which "to have an intention or belief concerning some item" requires one to "be in possession of a description uniquely true of it":

> What makes it one rather than the other of a pair of identical twins that you are in love with? Certainly not some specification blue printed in your mind; it may be no more than this: it was one of the other that you have met. […] If God had looked into your mind, he would not have seen whom you were in love, and of whom you were thinking. (Evans, "A Causal Theory", 191)

But, so Evans, Kripke's positive proposal has problems too and cannot be accepted.

(Evans' paper is full of insights and interesting examples, and we can only cover very few of them here. See also Imogen Dickie's "How Proper Names Refer".)

Problem I: Reference is Too Easy

Kripke's causal theory summed up by Evans:

> A speaker, using a name 'NN' on a particular occasion will denote some item x if there is a causal chain of *reference-preserving links* leading back from his use on that occasion ultimately to the item *x* itself being involved in a name-acquiring transaction such as an explicit dubbing or the more gradual process whereby nick names stick.
> […] a speaker A's transmission of a name 'NN' to a speaker B constitutes a reference-preserving link only if B intends to be using the name with the same denotation as he from whom he in his turn learned the name. (Evans 191, labels changed)

The Louis Case:

> A group of people are having a conversation in a pub, about a certain Louis of whom S has never heard before. S becomes interested and asks: 'What did Louis do then?' There seems to be no question but that S denotes a part man and asks about him. (192)

Initially this case will favourably dispose one towards the causal theory, for it can explain reference to Louis.

[…] the theory has the following consequence: that at any future time, no matter how remote or forgotten the conversation, no matter how alien the subject matter and confused the speaker, S will denote one particular Frenchman – perhaps Louis XIII – so long as there is a causal connexion between his use at that time and the long distant conversation. (193)

Suppose that long after the original conversation, S utters

Louis was a basketball player.

According to Kripke's causal theory, S thereby said that Louis XIII was a basketball player. But, so Evans, this is a silly result:

[…] notice how little *point* there is in saying that he denotes one French King rather than any other, or any other person named by the name. There is now nothing that the speaker is prepared to say or do which **relates him differentially to that one King** […] The notion of saying has simply been severed from all the connexions that made it of interest. (193, my emphasis)

According to Evans, Kripke has severed the connection "between strict truth conditions and the beliefs and interests of the users of the sentences" (193). He thereby replaced the implausible picture behind the description theory with a different picture that is similarly implausible:

The Causal Theory […] ignores the importance of surrounding context, and regards the capacity to denote something as a magic trick which has somehow been passed on, and once passed on cannot be lost. (193)

Problem II: Reference Switch

The Madagascar Case

We learn from Isaac Taylor's book: *Names and their History*, 1898:

"In the case of 'Madagascar' a hearsay report from Malay or Arab sailors misunderstood by Marco Polo … has had the effect of transferring a corrupt form of the name of a portion of the African mainland to the great African Island." (Evans, 196)

The case is as follows: "Madagascar" was initially introduced as a name of a part of the African mainland. Marco Polo learned the name but mistakenly thought that it refers to the great African island. Most other people then learned the name from him.

(This does not seem to be what actually happened, see John Burgess, "Madagascar Revisited").

Does "Madagascar" still refer to the mainland portion today? Is "Madagascar is an island" false?

It seems not: Plausibly the island-usage has become so entrenched that the reference of "Madagascar" *switched* from the mainland portion to the island.

But how, if at all, can Kripke explain this? After all, the initial baptism made the word refer to the mainland portion, and when Marco Polo learned about the name, he intended to use it with *the same reference it originally had*. He was just mistaken about what that was.

Evans's Positive Proposal

Evans's account is a mix of descriptive and causal elements.

Like descriptivists, he assumes that speakers associate "a cluster or dossier of information" with names, and that such information plays a role in determining what is being referred to.

However, unlike classical descriptivists, Evans does not think that the referent of a name is *whatever* object best *fits* the associated information. The referent "is rather that item which is **causally responsible for the speaker's possession of that body of information**, or dominantly responsible if there is more than one" (199, my emphasis).

<u>Gödel and Schmidt Again</u>

Our "dossier of information" contains "prover of the incompleteness theorem", but in the imaginary scenario this was proved by Schmidt rather than Gödel. Why does "Gödel" nevertheless refer to Gödel?

> Someone other than the Φ can be the source of the belief S expresses by 'a is the Φ'; Kripke's Gödel, by claiming the proof, was the source of the belief people manifested by saying 'Gödel proved the incompleteness of Arithmetic', not Schmidt. (200)

In the imaginary case, "the one who proved the incompleteness theorem" does not *apply* to Gödel, but Gödel is the source of the *belief* that it applies to him. This is because, in general, if someone publishes a paper claiming to have proved a particular theorem, this gives one good (though defeasible) reason to believe that the person *did* prove the theorem.

<u>Madagascar Explained</u>

We "surely want to allow that persistent misidentification can bring it about that a cluster is dominant of some item other than that it was dominantly of originally" (200).

Maybe this is how to think about the Madagascar case:

- When Marco Polo first learned the name "Madagascar", the dominant causal source of the information about it was the mainland portion, even though his dossier contained "Madagascar is an island".
- Initially "Madagascar" thus referred to the mainland portion.
- Since Marco Polo's misconception that "Madagascar" refers to an island spread, at some point the island actually became the dominant causal source of the relevant cluster of information.
- Thus the reference of "Madagascar" shifted to the island.

(What about the Louis case? Look at Evans's discussion of *deferred reference*.)