

The Problem of Unwanted Epistemic Necessities

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In this paper I will discuss some of the descriptivist arguments against Kripke's modal arguments. Of all Kripke's arguments against descriptivism, the modal ones are the most contested, in the sense that they are arguably weak or not decisive. One way to block modal arguments is by way of rigidifying the descriptions that give the sense of the names. I will show that although this strategy solves the problems associated with the modal arguments, it brings others. The aim of this paper is to prove once again the weakness of the descriptivist theories of names.

1. Anti-descriptivist Modal Arguments

We can formulate the classic descriptivist theory as follows:

- (D) For every name and for every use of that name by a competent speaker in a given context, there is a singular definite description such that:
- i. The speaker associates that singular definite description with the name in the context of use.
 - ii. The sense of the name is the sense of the singular definite description that the speaker associates with the name in the context of use.
 - iii. The reference of the name is determined by that description, as being that object and just that object that the definite description denotes in the context of use.

If, for instance, a competent English speaker associates with the name "Aristotle" the singular definite description "the disciple of Plato," then the sense of the name is the sense of the description. That is, the singular terms "Aristotle" and "the disciple of Plato" have the same content, they are synonymous. And the name designates that same object that the description denotes, namely, Aristotle. An important corollary of (D), from which we can formulate Kripke's arguments, is as follows:

- (C) If the sense of the name *NN* is the sense of the definite description *The F*, then *NN* and *The F* are synonymous. Therefore, sentences of the form "*NN* is *The F*" are analytic truths, in the sense that they are obtained from a logical truth by the substitution of synonymous by synonymous — *NN* and *The F*.

If the singular definite description, "the disciple of Plato" fixes the sense of

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the name “Aristotle” in the language of the speaker who associates the name with the description, then, by (C), the following sentence isn’t just true, but analytically true:

(1) Aristotle (if exists) is the disciple of Plato

This is because the terms “Aristotle” and “the disciple of Plato” are, by (C), synonymous terms, and then (1) is an instance of a logical truth of the type $a = a$.

Two of the best-known modal arguments, which I will discuss, are the so-called argument of *unwanted necessities* and argument of *lost rigidity*.²

The argument of unwanted necessities can be formulated as follows. If names are simply abbreviated definite descriptions, then the following sentences have the same meaning:

(1) Aristotle (if exists) is the disciple of Plato

(2) Aristotle (if exists) is Aristotle

This is because, according to (C), “Aristotle” and “the disciple of Plato” are synonymous. (2) is an analytical truth, and by (C), (1) is also an analytical truth. If every analytical truth is a necessary truth, then (1) and (2) are necessary truths. Yet (1) is not a necessary truth but a contingent one: Aristotle is the disciple of Plato, but he could have not been such. Therefore, (D) is false. We have an unwanted necessity.

The argument of lost rigidity is as follows:

Premise 1 Names are rigid designators

Premise 2 Descriptions are not rigid designators

Conclusion Names and descriptions have different semantic values, and therefore (D) is false.

Kripke set out the idea that names are rigid designators.³ A name is a rigid designator if it designates the same object in every possible world in which that object exists. This is a discovery made by looking to our modal intuitions about how names work. If, for instance, we say that Aristotle is the disciple of Plato, we are in fact referring to Aristotle. But if we say that Aristotle is not the disciple of Plato, to whom are we referring? To Aristotle, of course. “Aristotle” designates Aristotle in all the possible worlds where Aristotle exists, even in those cases where all we know about Aristotle is wrong. But a definite description just refers to those objects that satisfy its predicate. It is for this reason that (2) is a necessary truth and (1) is only contingently true.

An immediate consequence of the thesis of rigid designation is that if names are rigid designators, then they don’t have a descriptive content. Therefore (D) is false.

² Devitt & Sterelny, 1999: 51-4

³ Kripke, 1972.

2. Actualised Descriptivism

The descriptivist reply to the modal arguments is also of modal nature. It consists in rigidifying the descriptions that give the sense of the names, by way of blocking the modal anti-descriptivist arguments.

We rigidify a description using the modal operator of actuality. The definite descriptions that result from this process of indexing their predicates to the actual world we call “actualised descriptions.” Actualised descriptions, like names, designate the same object in all possible worlds in which that object exists. With the operator of actuality we can evaluate the term that it applies to in relation to counterfactual situations or possible worlds, in the sense that the semantic value of the term in the actual world is taken for a possible world. For instance, when we say that all we know about Aristotle could be wrong, we are still speaking about the object that the name “Aristotle” designates in the actual world, but in relation to a possible world. The same happens in the case of the actualised descriptions. For instance, the descriptions “the disciple of Plato” and “the actual disciple of Plato,” both denote the same object that satisfies the predicate “is the disciple of Plato” in the actual world, that is, Aristotle. Although the simple description may denote somebody else in relation to a possible world, the actualised description still denotes Aristotle, if it denotes Aristotle in the actual world.

Like the argument of lost rigidity, the argument of unwanted necessities is also blocked with this strategy. That is, the replacement of a name in an expression by the actualised description it abbreviates blocks any difference in the modal status of the expression that results from this process. That is, sentences like the following are both necessary truths:

- (2) Aristotle (if exists) is Aristotle
- (3) Aristotle (if exists) is the actual disciple of Plato

Therefore, we don’t have unwanted necessities anymore.

3. The Problem of Unwanted Epistemic Necessities

Although actualised descriptivism survives the modal arguments, it is not a satisfactory theory. Although there are modal replies to actualised descriptivism, based in the obstinate rigidity of names versus the persistent rigidity of descriptions,⁴ the one I present is an epistemic one.

Although it is true that we could not discover (2) to be false (it’s an instance of a logical truth), (3) is epistemically contingent, since we could discover it to be false. That is, we could come to discover that the description “the actual disciple of Plato” does not denote Aristotle after all. Thus, in the case of (3), but not (2), (3) could be false (in which case it would be a metaphysical necessary falsity). The status of (3) as a metaphysical necessity is compatible with its status of epistemic contingency. But the status of (2) as a logical necessity is not compatible with its status of epistemic contingency. Therefore, names and the

⁴ See J. Branquinho, “Sobrevive o Descriptivismo Actualizado aos Argumentos Modais?”

actualised descriptions they abbreviate are not synonymous. So actualised descriptivism is false. But if the actualised description “the actual disciple of Plato” denotes Aristotle, (3) is a necessary truth. But we could be wrong about Aristotle, and in that case, the description denotes another object. Then there exists an asymmetry between (2) and (3): (3) is epistemically contingent but not (2). Thus, (2) and (3) are not synonymous and we have an unwanted epistemic necessity. And if they are not synonymous, they don’t have the same meaning. Then we have a difference in semantic value between names and the actualised descriptions they abbreviated. Thus, descriptivism is, once again, false.

We can put the argument of unwanted epistemic necessities this way:

- Premise 1* Sentences of the form, “*NN* is *NN*” express epistemic necessities.
- Premise 2* The substitution of *NN* by the actualised description that the name abbreviates makes the sentence that results from this process epistemically contingent.
- Premise 3* The semantic value of a sentence depends on its epistemic modal value.
- Conclusion* Names and actualised descriptions have different semantic values. Therefore, actualised descriptivism is false.

Therefore, although actualised descriptivism evades the classical modal arguments against classical descriptivism, it still has the problem of unwanted epistemic necessities.

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