

## The Causal-Historical Theory of Reference

### 1. Kripke's Initial Statement:

Someone, let's say, a baby, is born; his parent call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Though various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain, who has heard about, say Richard Feynman, in the market place or elsewhere, may be referring to Richard Feynman even though he can't remember from whom he first heard of Feynman or from whom he ever heard of Feynman. He knows that Feynman is a famous physicist. A certain passage of communication reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker. He then is referring to Feynman even though he can't identify him uniquely. (p. 91)

According to the causal-historical theory of reference, there are two phases in the history of the use of the name 'Feynman':

- (a) **Introduction:** the name is first used to refer to a certain baby.
- (b) **Transmission:** the name is passed from user to user, until it reaches the end-user.

**(The Causal-Historical Theory of Reference)** A use of a proper name  $N$  by a speaker  $S$  refers to an individual  $x$  either in virtue of  $S$ 's use of  $N$  being an introductory use  $N$  as a name for  $x$ , or in virtue of  $S$ 's use of  $N$  being derived by a chain of name-use-transmission from the introductory use of  $N$  as a name for  $x$ .

### Remarks:

- (a) **Incompleteness:** Kripke's statement of the Causal-Historical theory of reference crucially employs the notion of reference. No answer to the question of the semantic bond is proposed for the introductory use of a name.
- (b) **Kripke suggests Reference-Fixing Descriptivism to fill the gap:**

A rough statement of a theory might be the following: An initial ‘baptism’ takes place. Here the object may be named by ostension, or the reference of the name may be fixed by ostension. (p. 96)

The case of a baptism by ostension can perhaps be subsumed under the description concept also. Thus the primary applicability of the description theory is to cases of initial baptism. (p. 96n.)

(Note the caginess: “rough statement.”)

- (c) **Some transmissions are pathological:** The name can be transmitted without preserving reference. Kripke proposes a case:

When the name is ‘passed from link to link’, the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it. If I hear the name ‘Napoleon’ and decide it would be a nice name for my pet aardvark I do not satisfy this condition. (p. 96)

I can transmit the name of the aardvark to other people. For each of these people, as for me, there will be a certain sort of causal or historical connection between my use of the name and the Emperor of the French, but not one of the required type. (p. 96n.)

[BTW: I don’t think recipients of the name need have the intention that Kripke claims is required. The case of Napoleon the aardvark is one in which this intention is missing, but also in which another intention, to introduce a new use for this name, is present.]

- (d) **Kripke makes no attempt to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for reference-preserving transmission:** He’s presenting a “picture”, not a theory.
- (e) **“It does not matter what you think”:** Once you have the name in your vocabulary, the information you have about the relevant individual is irrelevant to answering the question of the semantic bond. *What’s in your past is what’s relevant; what is in your mind is irrelevant.* You can be massively misinformed, or underinformed, about Feynman and still refer to him. You can

be utterly misinformed, or under-informed, about the history of your use of ‘Feynman’ and still refer to him.

(f) **Being well-positioned vs. knowing your position:**

You don’t have to know *anything* about how reference works, according to the causal-historical theory. You are just blessed to be on the receiving end of the chain of transmission of a name. Because you’re there, whether you know it or not, you can use the name to refer to Feynman. [ANALOGY]: You don’t have to know *anything* about how visual perception works, according to our best theories of perception. You are just blessed to be on the receiving end of a working visual system. Because you’re there, whether you know it or not, you can use your eyes to get information about this blackboard. Did you know your visual system is solving differential equations? Do you understand how? You still can see.

2. **Differences from Descriptivism:**

[T]he view advocated here can lead to consequences which actually *diverge* from those of Strawson’s footnote [*i.e.* Descriptivism + Deference]. Suppose that the speaker has heard the name ‘Cicero’ from Smith and others, who use the name to refer to a famous Roman orator. He later thinks, however, that he picked up the name from Jones, who (unknown to the speaker) uses ‘Cicero’ as the name of a notorious German spy and has never heard of any orators of the ancient world. [...] The point is that Strawson, trying to fit the chain of communication view into the description theory, relies on what the speaker *thinks* was the source of his reference. If the speaker has forgotten his source, the description Strawson uses is unavailable to him; if he misremembers it, Strawson’s paradigm can give the wrong results. On our view, it is not how the speaker thinks he got the reference, but the actual chain of communication, which is relevant. (pp. 92-3)

<b>Descriptivism</b>	<b>Causal-Historical Theory</b>
Information in your mind helps determine the referent of your name	It does not matter what you think; your historical position alone determines the referent of your name
You cannot be massively misinformed about the referent of your name	You can be massively misinformed about the referent of your name
You can't <b>really</b> be under-informed about the referent of your name; apparent cases of under-information are really cases of deference	You can be under-informed about the referent of your name.
If you are under-informed but still use a name to refer to some individual, you must be able to think about your own words	If you are under-informed but still use a name to refer to some individual, you do not need to be able to think about your own words.

3. **The ‘Madagascar’ Problem:** Recall that some name-transmissions are pathological, in that they do not preserve reference. Kripke proposed the following statement of a necessary condition for reference-preserving transmission of the use of a name:

**(INTENTION)** The transmission of a name preserves reference **only if** the transmittee intends to use the name with the same reference as the transmitter.

Suppose we strengthen this claim so that it also says that the **only thing** required for reference-preservation is that the transmittee have the relevant intention.

**(INTENTION)<sup>+</sup>** The transmission of a name preserves reference **iff** the transmittee intends to use the name with the same reference as the transmitter.

**(INTENTION)<sup>+</sup>** has counterexamples. Consider the case of ‘Madagascar’ (from Evans, “The Causal Theory of Names”): When Marco Polo first picked up the name from some Africans, it referred to the eastern coast of Africa. But later explorers, on the basis of a mistake, started calling a certain island off the east coast of Africa ‘Madagascar’. Now, when you say ‘Madagascar’, you refer to the island, rather than the continental coastal region. But we can imagine that everyone along the chain of ‘Madagascar’-transmission, from Marco Polo to you,

had the intention required by (INTENTION)<sup>+</sup>. Reference has switched somehow despite our intentions.

Note that Kripke's original (INTENTION), though not shown false by the 'Madagascar' case, does not explain why reference fails to be preserved for the entire length of the chain. Thus, it is, at best, incomplete.

**The Problem:** What necessary condition for reference-preservation does the transmission of 'Madagascar' fail to satisfy?

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### Two phases in the history of 'Feynman':

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- (d) **Kripke makes no attempt to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for reference-preserving transmission**
- (e) **“It does not matter what you think”** *What’s in your past is what’s relevant; what is in your mind is irrelevant.*
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*Louis deRosset – Spring 2011*

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Even (INTENTION) is incomplete.

**The Problem:** What necessary condition for reference-preservation does the transmission of ‘Madagascar’ fail to satisfy?