

The Epistemic Argument

1. Reference-Fixing and *A Priority*:

Kripke thinks that using a description to fix the reference of a proper name gives rise to *a priori* knowledge.

- (a) **The case of the standard meter:** Consider the case of the introduction of the expression ‘meter’ as a unit of length:

Suppose someone stipulates that ...one meter is to be the length of *S* where *S* is a certain stick or bar in Paris. (p. 54) [...] He uses [the description ‘the length of *S* at *t*₀’] to fix a reference. There is a certain length which he wants to mark out. He marks it out by an accidental property, namely that there is a stick of that length. (p. 55)

What then, is the *epistemological* status of the statement ‘Stick *S* is one meter long at *t*₀’, for someone who has fixed the metric system by reference to stick *S*? [Note Kripke’s Fix!] It would seem he knows it *a priori*. For if he used stick *D* to fix the reference of the term ‘one meter’, then as a result of this kind of ‘definition’ (which is not an abbreviative or synonymous definition), he knows automatically, without further investigation, that *S* is one meter long. (p. 56)

- (b) **Knowledge by stipulation?** The picture seems to be this. Suppose you introduce the name ‘Aristotle’ in the following way:

- (1) I hereby stipulate that I shall use ‘Aristotle’ to (rigidly) refer to the Stagirite teacher of Alexander the Great.

Then you get to know *a priori* (without investigation by means of your senses) that the statement

- (2) If there is any such individual as Aristotle, then Aristotle was from Stagira.

You know this because it follows from how you have decided to use your word ‘Aristotle’. Your knowledge is thus dependent on your *stipulation*, not on whatever information you garner by empirical means. That at least is what Kripke seems to indicate (though he most emphatically does NOT provide the explanation I have offered.)

- (c) ***A Priority* everywhere!** Notice that this means that just about anything that’s true of Aristotle can be known

a priori to be true of him (if he exists): All you need to do is stuff the relevant information into a reference-fixing stipulation for a name which refers to him.

- (3) I hereby stipulate that I shall use ‘Aristotle’ to (rigidly) refer to the individual who (i) is a Stagirite teacher of Alexander the Great; and (ii) **had brown eyes** (or **had plebeian toes**, or **liked dogs**, *etc.*).

(Actually, you can stuff in any truth you like.)

(d) **An Alleged Consequence:**

Both Synonymy Descriptivism and Reference-Fixing Descriptivism, when supplemented with the Knowledge or Little Lecture accounts of association seem to imply:

(ALLEGED CONSEQUENCE) Users of the name ‘Aristotle’ know *a priori* that

- (4) If there is any such individual as Aristotle, then Aristotle did most of D_1, D_2, \dots .

i. **Synonymy Descriptivism:** (4) is synonymous with:

- (5) If there is any such individual as the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots , then the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots did most of D_1, D_2, \dots

which is just a long-winded logical truth.

ii. **Reference-Fixing Descriptivism:** The referent of ‘Aristotle’ is fixed by the description ‘the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots ’. As we have seen, Kripke thinks this gives rise to *a priori* knowledge of the truth of (4).

2. **The Setup: The Gödel-Schmidt case: [BACKGROUND]**

Kurt Gödel is famous (among philosophers and mathematicians) for having discovered certain theorems, including the claim that the arithmetical truths are not “recursively enumerable.” This is Gödel’s most famous deed.

Imagine the following blatantly fictional situation. (I hope professor Gödel is not present.) Suppose that Gödel was not in fact the author of this theorem. A man named ‘Schmidt’, whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and it was thereafter attributed to Gödel. (pp. 83-4)

3. **Kripke's Argument:**

Thesis 5 says that the statement 'If X exists, then X has most of the ϕ 's', is *a priori* true for A . Notice that even in a case where (3) and (4) [, according to which the referent of a name is fixed by the description 'the individual who has most of the ϕ 's',] *happen* to be true, a typical speaker hardly knows *a priori* that they are, as required by the theory. I *think* that my belief about Gödel *is* in fact correct and that the 'Schmidt' story is just a fantasy. But the belief hardly constitutes *a priori* knowledge. (p. 87)

4. **The Epistemic Argument:** Pick any theory you get by wed-
ding some brand of Descriptivism (Synonymy or Reference-
Fixing) to some account of association we have discussed (the
Knowledge or Little Lecture accounts, rigidified or not). That
theory implies (ALLEGED CONSEQUENCE). But typical users
of 'Aristotle' who know (4) know it on the basis of what they
have read or been told. Thus (4) does not express some truth
they know *a priori*. Hence (ALLEGED CONSEQUENCE) is
false.

5. **Does Reference-fixing really yield *a priori* knowledge?:**

My main worry stems from a phenomenon that Kripke notes:

[W]e should add that in some cases, an object may be iden-
tified, and the reference of a name fixed, using a description
which may turn out to be false of its object. The case where
the reference of 'Phosphorus' is determined as the 'morning
star', which later turns out not to be a star, is an obvious
example. In such cases, the description which fixes the ref-
erence clearly is in no sense known *a priori* to hold of the
object, though a more cautious substitute may be. If such
a more cautious substitute is available, it is really the sub-
stitute which fixes the reference in the sense intended in the
text. (p. 80n.)

REMARKS:

- (a) **Reference-fixing is not by description!** What Kripke
seems to be saying is: a description can fix the reference
of a name to be a certain thing even though it does not
accurately describe that thing. WTF?

(b) **No answer to the question of the semantic bond!**

If the description does not pick out the right thing, how can it fix the reference? We have no answer here to the question of the semantic bond.

(c) **“Just because you stipulate it does not mean it’s true”:** It seems I can introduce a name by saying:

(6) I hereby stipulate that I shall use ‘Phosphorus’ to (rigidly) refer to the last star visible in the morning sky.

and yet

(7) Phosphorus is the last star visible in the morning sky.
be false.

(d) **Do cautious substitutes help?** In the case of ‘Phosphorus’, there plausibly is a more cautious substitute associated with the name by its introducer. But in other cases there probably isn’t a more cautious substitute available. Consider the case of Neptune:

An even better case of determining the reference of a name by description, as opposed to ostension, is the discovery of the planet Neptune. Neptune was hypothesized as the planet which caused such and such discrepancies in the orbit of certain other planets. [...] At this stage, an *a priori* material equivalence held between the statements ‘Neptune exists’ and ‘some one planet perturbing the orbit of such and such other planets exists in such and such a position’, and also such statements as ‘if such a such perturbations are caused by a planet, they are caused by Neptune’ had the status of *a priori* truths [for LeVerrier]. (p. 79n)

(e) **The Response:** In the bad case (the description is not true of the referent), reference-fixing stipulations do not give rise to *a priori* knowledge. Do they also fail to do so in the good case (when the description is true of the referent)? If so, then Reference-Fixing Descriptivism does not imply (ALLEGED CONSEQUENCE).

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1. Reference-Fixing and *A Priority*

(a) The case of the standard meter

Suppose someone stipulates that ... one meter is to be the length of *S* where *S* is a certain stick or bar in Paris. (p. 54) [...] He uses [the description 'the length of *S* at t_0 '] to fix a reference. There is a certain length which he wants to mark out. He marks it out by an accidental property, namely that there is a stick of that length. (p. 55)

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i. Synonymy Descriptivism

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