

The Modal Argument(s)

1. Famous Deeds:

Synonymy Descriptivism, on either the Knowledge or Little Lecture accounts of association, will imply that most language users associate with ‘Aristotle’ a condition satisfied only by someone who did most of the most famous deeds commonly attributed to Aristotle. That’s because that’s what most of us still know about Aristotle, and that’s how we would describe him if we were asked to say to whom or what our use of ‘Aristotle’ referred to. Thus:

(1) Aristotle

will, according to Synonymy Descriptivism, be synonymous with

(2) The individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots ,

where D_1, D_2, \dots are the famous deeds commonly attributed to Aristotle. (They will include such things as: being from Stagira, teaching Alexander the Great, being a philosopher, writing the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and so on.)

2. Kripke’s Argument(s)

Most of the things commonly attributed to Aristotle are things that Aristotle might not have done at all. In a situation in which he didn’t do them, we would describe that as a situation in which *Aristotle* didn’t do them. [...] [W]e use the term ‘Aristotle’ in such a way that, in thinking of a counterfactual situation in which Aristotle didn’t go into any of the fields and do any of the achievements we commonly attribute to him, still we would say that was a situation in which *Aristotle* did not do these things. [...] Not only each of [the famous deeds] singly, but the possession of the entire disjunction of these properties, is just a contingent fact about Aristotle; and the statement that Aristotle had this disjunction of properties is a contingent truth. (pp. 61-3)

3. The modal profile argument

The sentence

(3) Aristotle did not do any of D_1, D_2, \dots

is true at some possible world. But the sentence

(4) The individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots did not do any of D_1, D_2, \dots

is false at every possible world, since it requires the possibil-

ity that a contradiction be true. Hence, ‘Aristotle’ is not semantically indiscernible from ‘the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots ’.

4. **The argument from rigid designation:** ‘Aristotle’ is a rigid designator, since it passes the “intuitive test” for rigid designation:

- (5) Someone other than Aristotle might have been Aristotle

is intuitively false. “The individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots ” is not a rigid designator, since it fails the “intuitive test” for rigid designation:

- (6) Someone other than the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots might have been the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots

is intuitively true. Hence ‘Aristotle’ is not semantically indiscernible from ‘the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots ’.

5. **The modal profile argument is better:** Since it does not rely on the idea that ‘the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots ’ is non-rigid. For consider:

- (7) the father of three of Aristotle’s children.

It is plausible to think that this definite description is a rigid designator, never designating anyone other than Aristotle at any possible world. Nevertheless,

- (8) Aristotle is the father of three of Aristotle’s children

is false in some possible world in which Aristotle had only two children. Similarly, even if it turns out that ‘the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots ’ is a rigid designator, it still seems possible that Aristotle have just been lazier (or less lucky). (A contrasting reconstruction of the modal arguments are given by Scott Soames, “The Modal Argument: Wide Scope and Rigidified Descriptions.”)

6. **Both arguments discern names and associated descriptions by differences in what they designate at various possible worlds.**

[BLACKBOARD]: Draw the chart with designation-by-description on one side, and designation-at-worlds on the other.

7. **Two response strategies:**

(a) **Rigidification:**

- i. **The actual world:** Among all of the possible worlds, there is one whose “opinions” are all true: For every sentence P , P is true at this world iff P is true PERIOD. This is usually called *the actual world*.

[**TERMINOLOGY**]: The *actual world* is the possible world w such that, for every claim P , P is true iff P is true at w .

- ii. **Being the actual F :** Given any condition F , there is a further condition G which something satisfies iff it satisfies F at the actual world. Thus, we can introduce a new kind of description:

Given a condition F , the description ‘the **actual** F ’ refers to an individual at a possible world w iff F singles that individual out at the actual world.

For example, consider:

(9) the president of the United States in 2001

. At the actual world, this description singles out George Bush. Now consider

(10) the **actual** president of the United States in 2001

This description singles out the same individual in the actual world. But consider now **AL GORE’S WORLD**, in which Gore won the 2000 electoral vote.

What does (9) refer to at **AL GORE’S WORLD**?

What does (10) refer to at **AL GORE’S WORLD**?

- iii. **‘the actual F ’ is rigid:** The referent of (10) will be the same individual at all possible worlds. [**BLACKBOARD**]: Draw the “quick peek” cartoon. Thus, an expression like (10) is called a *rigidified definite description*.

- iv. **The response:** ‘Aristotle’ is synonymous with:

(11) the **actual** individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots

Since (11) is rigid, and designates Aristotle in any possible world, no matter what he did or did not do at that world, the modal argument has no force against this brand of synonymy descriptivism.

- (b) **Reference-Fixing Descriptivism:** Kripke distinguishes between a description’s *giving the meaning* of a proper name, and its *fixing the reference* of the description.

[S]uppose we say, ‘Aristotle is the greatest man who studied with Plato’. If we used that as a *definition*, [as the Synonymy Descriptivist does,] the name ‘Aristotle’ is to mean, ‘the greatest man who studied with Plato’. Then of course in some other possible world that man might not have studied with Plato and some other man would have been Aristotle [according to Synonymy Descriptivism]. If, on the other hand, we merely use the description to *fix the reference* then that man will be the referent of ‘Aristotle’ in all possible worlds. The only use of the description will have been to pick out to which man we mean to refer. (p. 57)

i. **Reference-fixing Descriptivism:**

- (i) A proper name *N* used by a language-user *S* refers to an individual *x* in virtue of *S*’s association with *N* of a condition which singles out *x*;
- (ii) Otherwise, the sole fundamental semantic feature of *N* is that it refers to *x*.

ii. **Differences from Synonymy Descriptivism:**

- A. **How reference at a world is determined:** According to Synonymy Descriptivism, reference at a world and reference are on a par: both are determined by what fits the associated condition at that world. Reference-Fixing Descriptivism, by way of contrast, is a two-tone view. According to Reference-Fixing Descriptivism, reference at a world is a less fundamental semantic feature than reference (PERIOD), and so is determined by reference (PERIOD).
- B. **Subject Matter:** According to Synonymy Descriptivism, any sentence containing ‘Aristotle’ is in part about, *e.g.*, his famous deeds. According to Reference-Fixing Descriptivism, it’s just about *him*.
- C. **Rigidity:** According to Reference-Fixing Descriptivism, proper names are sure to be rigid designators. Synonymy Descriptivism needs extra apparatus to ensure rigid designation.
- D. **Toleration of Difference:** According to Synonymy Descriptivism, differences of associated description make for differences of meaning. You and I mean

something different when we say, ‘Aristotle liked dogs’ if we associate difference descriptions with ‘Aristotle’. Not so, according to Reference-Fixing Descriptivism, so long as the referent is the same.

- iii. **Reference-Fixing Descriptivism avoids the modal arguments:** Since, according to Reference-Fixing Descriptivism, ‘Aristotle’ is rigid, and designates Aristotle in any possible world no matter what he did or did not do at that world, the modal argument has no force against it.

The Modal Argument(s)

1. Famous Deeds

- (1) Aristotle
- (2) The individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots

(ALLEGED CONSEQUENCE) (1) and (2) are semantically indiscernible (*i.e.*, synonymous).

2. Kripke's Argument(s)

Most of the things commonly attributed to Aristotle are things that Aristotle might not have done at all. In a situation in which he didn't do them, we would describe that as a situation in which *Aristotle* didn't do them. [...] [W]e use the term 'Aristotle' in such a way that, in thinking of a counterfactual situation in which Aristotle didn't go into any of the fields and do any of the achievements we commonly attribute to him, still we would say that was a situation in which *Aristotle* did not do these things. [...] Not only each of [the famous deeds] singly, but the possession of the entire disjunction of these properties, is just a contingent fact about Aristotle; and the statement that Aristotle had this disjunction of properties is a contingent truth. (pp. 61-3)

3. The modal profile argument

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- is true at some possible world. But the sentence
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- is false at every possible world. Hence, 'Aristotle' is not semantically indiscernible from 'the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots '.

4. The argument from rigid designation

'Aristotle' is a rigid designator, since it passes the "intuitive test" for rigid designation:

- (5) Someone other than Aristotle might have been Aristotle
- is intuitively false. (2) is not a rigid designator, since it fails the "intuitive test" for rigid designation:
- (6) Someone other than the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots might have been the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots
- is intuitively true. Hence 'Aristotle' is not semantically indiscernible from 'the individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots ' (2).

5. The modal profile argument is better

- (7) the father of three of Aristotle's children.
- (8) Aristotle is the father of three of Aristotle's children

6. Both arguments discern names and associated descriptions by differences in what they designate at various possible worlds.

7. Two response strategies:

(a) Rigidification:

i. The actual world

[**TERMINOLOGY**]: The *actual world* is the possible world w such that, for every claim P , P is true iff P is true at w .

ii. Being the *actual* F :

Given a condition F , the description ‘the *actual* F ’ refers to an individual at a possible world w iff F singles that individual out at the actual world.

(9) the president of the United States in 2001

(10) the *actual* president of the United States in 2001

iii. ‘the *actual* F ’ is rigid

[**TERMINOLOGY**]: An expression like (10) is called a *rigidified definite description*.

iv. The response

(11) the *actual* individual who did most of D_1, D_2, \dots

(b) Reference-Fixing

[S]uppose we say, ‘Aristotle is the greatest man who studied with Plato’. If we used that as a *definition*, [as the Synonymy Descriptivist does,] the name ‘Aristotle’ is to mean, ‘the greatest man who studied with Plato’. Then of course in some other possible world that man might not have studied with Plato and some other man would have been Aristotle [according to Synonymy Descriptivism]. If, on the other hand, we merely use the description to *fix the reference* then that man will be the referent of ‘Aristotle’ in all possible worlds. The only use of the description will have been to pick out to which man we mean to refer. (p. 57)

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(i) A proper name N used by a language-user S refers to an individual x in virtue of S ’s association with N of a condition which singles out x ;

(ii) Otherwise, the sole fundamental semantic feature of N is that it refers to x .

ii. Differences from Synonymy Descriptivism:

A. How reference at a world is determined

B. Subject Matter

C. Securing Rigidity

D. Toleration of Difference

iii. The response