Louis deRosset – Spring 2011

Kripke on Rigid Designation

1. **More on how possible worlds have "opinions"**: Discussion of possible worlds arose out of the use of possible worlds in modal logic (the logic of necessity and possibility). (SC) is a central tenet of that logic. A standard practice in logic (and semantics) is to trace the semantic properties of sentences to the semantic properties of their constituents. Now, the fact that

   (1) Bush lost the 2000 electoral vote

   is true at a certain possible world w is a semantic feature of the sentence. Why is (1) true at w? The standard answer is: because the designator 'Bush' designates a certain individual at w, and that individual lost the 2000 electoral vote, according to w.

2. **Designators don't just have referents in the real world; they have referents at possible worlds.**

   (2) The number of planets

   This expression designates the number 8 in the actual world. But it might have designated the number 5 at some possible world at which "there are 5 planets" is true. The truth of a sentence in which (1) occurs depends on what (2) designates:

   > **(SUBJECT-PREDICATE)** A sentence of the form 'D is F' (for D a designator) is true at a possible world w iff D designates an individual at w which is F at w.

   For instance the truth of

   (3) The number of planets is odd

   depends on what the designator's referent is. If it's the actual referent of (2), then (3) is false. It it's what we used to think was the actual referent of (2), then (3) is true.

3. **Definite descriptions refer at a given possible world by description**: As it goes for the actual referent of a definite description like (2), so it goes for the referent of (2) at some possible world. [**BLACKBOARD**]: Draw the triangular cartoon with some different referents in different possible worlds.

4. **Rigid designation defined**: Here is one of several different definitions Kripke gives of the idea of a *rigid designator*:

> Let's call something a *rigid designator* if in every possible world it designates the same object, a *nonrigid* or *accidental designator* if that is not the case. (p. 48)

(There are lots of little technical differences among Kripke's definitions of the crucial notion that we'll just ignore.)

5. **Kripke avoids problems involving reference failure like the plague**. So let's just forget about worlds in which a designator has no referent.

6. **Kripke's Thesis**:

> One of the intuitive theses I will maintain in these talks is that *names* are rigid designators. (p. 48)

7. **The intuitive test**: Kripke proposes an "intuitive test" for rigid designation.

> On of the intuitive theses I will maintain in these talks is that *names* are rigid designators. Certainly they seem to satisfy the intuitive test mentioned above: although someone other than the U.S. President in 1970 might have been the U.S. President in 1970 (e.g., Humphrey might have), no one other than Nixon might have been Nixon.

(INTUITIVE TEST) A designator D is a nonrigid designator if it is, intuitively speaking, true that some individual other than (the individual who is *in fact*) D might have been D. If that is, intuitively speaking, false, then D is a rigid designator.

The name 'Nixon' is a rigid designator according to the intuitive test, since

(4) Some individual other than Nixon might have been Nixon

is evidently false. OTOH, the definite description

(5) the first postmaster general of the United States

is a nonrigid designator according to the intuitive test, since

(6) Some individual other that the first Postmaster General might have been the first Postmaster General

is evidently true.

8. **Some definite descriptions are rigid designators**, despite the fact that they refer by describing.

(7) the even prime

designates the number 2 in every possible world. Intuitively, it is false to claim that some individual other than the individual which is *in fact* the even prime might have been the even prime.

9. **AN UPSHOT: Kripke's thesis does not (without argument) imply that names are not definite descriptions**. Thus, establishing Kripke's Thesis does nothing to resolve debates over the mechanism in virtue of which a name refers to a certain individual. In particular, it does nothing to establish that names do not refer by describing. For this reason, I wish that Kripke had never introduced the notion: it's not obviously relevant to the debate over the question of the semantic bond.

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