

Description vs. Causal Theories of Names

The description theory of the reference of proper names:

Given any subject S, name "Stan" and family or cluster of properties \emptyset such that S believes "Stan has \emptyset "

Then

- (1)
 - (a) The individual S denotes by "Stan" has most of the \emptyset 's
 - (b) Whatever unique object has most of the \emptyset s is the individual S denotes by "Stan"
- (2) S knows *a priori* that
 - (a) if Stan exists, Stan has most of the \emptyset 's
 - (b) whatever has most of the \emptyset s is Stan
- (3) It is *necessarily* the case that
 - (a) if Stan exists, Stan has most of the \emptyset s
 - (b) whatever has most of the \emptyset s is Stan

(1) is essential to the theory; (2) and (3) are apparent consequences.

Objections to the Description View of the Reference of Proper Names:

1. Metaphysical arguments (contra thesis (3))

if the theory were correct, then it seems that it is *necessarily* the case that Thales held that all is water

since 'Thales' *means* for S 'Greek philosopher who held that all is water'

and it clearly is necessary that the Greek philosopher who held that all is water held that all is water.

But clearly Thales *could* have held an entirely different doctrine from the one he did in fact hold. Even though he *did* hold that all is water, he didn't *have* to hold that all is water.

This is connected with Kripke's argument that 'Thales' is a *rigid designator*.

Let's lead up to what this means.

meaning₂ (meaning as reference-determiner) has to determine not just what a term *actually* refers to, but also what it *would have* referred to had things gone differently.

'bachelor' means 'unmarried male', and this determines not just who 'bachelor' actually refers to but also who it would refer to in counterfactual situations (e.g. if I hadn't gotten married).

we may say that the meaning of 'bachelor' determines not just what the term refers to with respect to the *actual* world, but also with respect to *other possible worlds*

(What is a possible world? --A way things might have been; a complete world history.)

Now, if the meaning of "Thales" were "Greek philosopher who held that all is water" then with respect to *every* possible world with respect to which the name 'Thales' referred to anyone, it would refer to someone who held that all is water.

So 'Thales held that all is water' would be true with respect to every possible world. And that's what it is to be *necessary*.

But as a matter of fact it seems clear that there are possible worlds with respect to which 'Thales does *not* denote a Greek philosopher who held that all is water.

Notice that if the term 'Thales' meant "Greek philosopher who held that all is water," then the term would denote different people with respect to different possible worlds. (For example, in a world in which Heraclitus holds that all is water & Thales does not, 'Thales' would denote Heraclitus.)

Just as 'bachelor' refers to different individuals in different possible worlds.

But in fact we think names *don't* refer to different people with respect to different possible worlds.

w@	w ₂	w ₃
Thales holds that all is water	Thales denies that all is water	Thales denies that all is water
Heraclitus maintains that the way up is the way down	Heraclitus maintains that all is water	No one maintains that all is water
Plato teaches Aristotle		

So we take the view that proper names like 'Thales' are *rigid designators*, i.e. denote the same-thing with respect to every possible world (in which they denote anything).

But the orthodox view can be patched up.
perhaps 'Thales' means

'the individual who *actually* held that all is water'

That is rigid, and now "Thales is the individual who held that all is water' is contingent, as it should be.

(but notice that this does not help (3b).)

2. epistemological arguments

If the modified version of the description theory is true, it would still be *a priori* that Thales held that all is water

Just as, on Kripke's view, it is *a priori* that the standard meter is a meter even though it's not necessary.

But it seems we could *find out otherwise*

If 'Thales' (as used by S) means the person who actually was a Greek philosopher who held that all is water

then S knows *a priori* that Thales held that all is water

but if this were possible, there could be no discovery that Thales didn't after all hold that all was water

But this doesn't seem right! For example, it seems it could turn out that the texts were corrupt and Thales' doctrine has been misunderstood.

that may not be conclusive: after all, the theory says only that it's *a priori* that *most* of S's beliefs about Thales are correct. Maybe that is compatible with a small number of those beliefs turning out to be false.

but couldn't *most of* them be false?

Thales was not Greek but Martian

He didn't hold that all was water but that it would be nice if all were water

He was not a philosopher at all but a well-digger

3. semantic arguments

The strongest arguments against the description theory are the semantic ones.

(a) One might have altogether false beliefs about the bearer of a name.

(suppose it's actually the case that the guy at the back of the causal chain that led to our use of the name 'Thales' didn't say the things we credit him with. Does it follow that 'Thales' doesn't refer to him? -- It seems not.)

(b)

(i) often the descriptions available to us won't pick out *anyone* uniquely.

(what if more than one Greek philosopher held that all is water?)

-Ramses 8: one of several Egyptian Pharaohs about whom nothing is known

(ii) and in other cases it seems they will pick out the *wrong* person.

note difference between semantic & modal arguments:

modal: 'Thales does not pick out x in w

semantic: if it were actually the case that P, 'Thales' would refer to -----

(the 'actually' dodge saves the argument from the modal arguments but not from the semantic ones)