

THE DESCRIPTION THEORY OF NAMES: OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

The Description Theory of the reference of proper names:

Given any subject S, name 'stan', and family or cluster of properties ϕ such that S believes 'Stan has ϕ ', an utterance of 'Stan' by S denotes whatever unique thing has most of the ϕ s.

Consequences of the theory:

(1) semantic

- (a) the individual S denotes by 'Stan' has most of the ϕ s
- (b) whatever unique individual has most of the ϕ s is the individual S denotes by 'Stan'

(2) epistemological

- (a) S knows *a priori* that if Stan exists, Stan has most of the ϕ s
- (b) S knows *a priori* that whatever has most of the ϕ s is Stan

(3) metaphysical

- (a) Necessarily, if Stan exists, Stan has most of the ϕ s
- (b) Necessarily, whatever has most of the ϕ s is Stan

Kripke-style objections

The man I refer to as 'Thales' or 'Jonah' (e.g.) may have hardly any of the properties I think he has

1. Often our descriptions are not complete enough to pick out anyone

uniquely

-example: entry on Ramses VIII: "one of several Egyptian Pharaohs about whom nothing is known."

-Twin Earth examples seem to show that this could be the *usual* case

2. In other cases it seems our descriptions might pick out the *wrong* person

it seems that we could discover that (e.g.) Thales didn't maintain that all is water, wasn't Greek, etc.

This is clearly false. Even if we are *given* that Thales *did* do the things we believe he did, he surely *might* have failed to. (If 3a were true, 'Stan' would not be a rigid designator.)

Descriptionist responses (cf. Searle 1982)

Maybe. But we could not be *wholly* mistaken. We will be correct, for example, in thinking that 'Thales' when we use it denotes whatever was denoted by the person from whom we got the name. (In cases where we have named an object, we will be correct in thinking that the name denotes whatever we dubbed when we bestowed the name.) We should think of the denotation, for S, of 'Stan' as whatever has a weighted most of the ϕ s.

We have a uniquely determining description for Ramses VIII: the Egyptian Pharaoh between Ramses VII and Ramses IX.

Even in Twin Earth cases there will be a description which picks out the referent but not its Twin Earth counterpart (e.g. 'person I am seeing now').

Maybe if we just counted ϕ s. But if we weight the importance of the ϕ s the answer will always come out right.

Granted. But the description theory need not have consequence (3): we might mean by 'Stan' merely "the person who *actually* has most of the ϕ s." (Notice that this is a rigid designator.)

Some replies on behalf of the "new" or "causal" theory

These descriptions will be correct, but only because they reproduce the history of S's acquisition of the name. (Weighting the ϕ s will work only if we give weight 1 to the description "whatever I dubbed when I bestowed the name," in the case of names, and to "whatever the person I got the name from referred to," in the case of others; and give weight 0 to all other descriptions.)

This is true only if 'Ramses VIII' is not really a proper name but merely short for e.g. the description "the seventh Egyptian pharaoh named 'Ramses'." If 'Ramses VIII' is a genuine proper name, the description could turn out to be false. (Maybe they wanted to reserve that name for a special occasion.)

This *only* works if your description contains an indexical expression (e.g. 'I', 'now', 'here', 'this'). But then we need to address the question whether *indexical* reference is determined by description, and here the answer seems clearly 'no'. (All the non-indexical descriptions I have of myself apply equally to my Twin Earth counterpart.)

Only if the weighting matches the "new theory." See first response above.

