Lecture 2
The Causal-Historical Account

1. **Review**

   Last week, we reviewed descriptivism about names. We also looked at a series of objections that Kripke and others have raised against descriptivism. These were (briefly) as follows:

   (1) Problems arising from entailment. The descriptive account had highly unintuitive consequences for what sentences including names entail.

   (2) Ambiguity and disagreement. On the descriptive account, sentences that look contradictory fail to be so when the speakers know some subject under two different descriptions.

   (3) Modal objection. Names have different modal profiles to descriptions. Therefore, the latter cannot be substituted into all sentences containing the former *salva veritate*.

   (4) Epistemic objection. On descriptivism, some sentences that are knowable a priori are equivalent in meaning to sentences that are *not* knowable a priori.

   (5) Semantic objection. It seems like we can successfully refer, even when we know the subject under a false description; but descriptivism precludes this.

   (6) Fictional entities. It looks like we can make true claims about fictional things. But if sentences with names are quantified sentences, then all claims about fictional things are false.

2. **Kripke's Causal-Historical Account**

   In *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke gives us a sketch of a positive account of names.

   > *Someone, let's say, a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain*
   > *name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet*
   > *him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to*
   > *link as if by a chain* (1980: 91)

   In other words, there is an initial **naming** or **dubbing event**. Then, each subsequent use of the relevant name refers to the named object when it is linked by a "**chain of communication**" to that dubbing event. The chain of communication will be a **causal**

chain. However, Kripke is clear that this sketch so far is "far less specific than a real set of necessary and sufficient conditions for reference would be" (93).

He does add at least one further condition to the causal chain condition. And that is that when someone learns a name from another speaker, the receiver must "**intend** when he learns it **to use it with the same reference** as the man from whom he heard it" (96, my emphasis).

This rules out the example about my neighbour's cat from last time. I'm not saying of the teacher of Alexander that he is fluffy when I say 'Aristotle is fluffy' because I don't intend to use the name 'Aristotle' with the same reference as the person who told me 'Aristotle was the student of Plato'. Instead, I intend to use the name with the same reference as *my neighbours.*

What advantages does this account (or sketch of an account) bear over descriptivism? Well, let's consider the objections again.

(1) **Problems arising from entailment.** On the causal-historical account, names are not equivalent in meaning to a description. As such, a sentence like 'Rosalind Franklin went to Newnham' does not entail 'Someone was a chemist who was not credited for their work on DNA structure' (as it would on descriptivism).

(2) **Ambiguity and disagreement.** This problem arose because people could be known to different speakers under different descriptions. However, on a causal-historical account, as long as both speakers can trace a causal chain back to the *same* dubbing event, then they can successfully disagree. Arguably, they will always be able to do this when they are using a name to refer to the same person.

Consider the example from last week again. There, an English student and a Philosophy student made the following two claims:

P$_1$: *Mary Wollstonecraft was not born in London.*
E$_1$: *Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London.*

We imagined that these students knew Mary Wollstonecraft under two completely different descriptions. Despite this, on the causal-historical account, they would still succeed in disagreeing since each of their uses of the name 'Mary Wollstonecraft' can be traced back (let's suppose) to the event of Wollstonecraft's parents naming her.

(3) **Modal objection.** This objection to descriptivism arose because they identify the meaning of a name with the meaning of a description. Since the causal account does not do this, modal divergence cannot occur.

(4) **Epistemic objection.** Same as (3), *mutatis mutandis*.

(5) **Semantic objection.** Same as (3), *mutatis mutandis*.

Now, you might worry that if there are any unusual causal chains, the causal account will face a similar worry. One such kind of case concerns *changes of reference*. Suppose *x* and *y* are two different babies. The parents of *x* name their child 'Flopsy' and the parents of *y* name their child 'Mopsy'. Now suppose that the two babies get switched so that, unbeknownst to them, the parents of *x* take *y* home, and *vice versa*. A year later, when the parents of *x* say something like

'Flopsy is so big now!'

how come they don't end up referring to *x* instead of to *y*?

This is not the same objection as the original one faced by descriptivism, of course, since it does not at all turn on descriptions. However, it is similar in that it concerns cases where the causal account seems unable to account for the intuitive meaning of a given sentence. It is another case where it seems like we can successfully refer in spite of some 'misfire'.

(6) **Fictional entities.** Now, it might seem like causal accounts would struggle to account for true claims about fictional entities, since there are no such entities to be dubbed. However, they can explain the meaning of names like 'Lady Macbeth' by identifying a kind of quasi-dubbing event such as the creation of a character in the writing of a play. From there, the rest of the causal account can remain much the same. So, when I say 'Lady Macbeth framed Duncan's attendants' I say something true; I refer to the fictional character because of the causal chain joining my utterance with the creation of the character, and I say something true of that character.

The causal-historical account can also successfully resolve the puzzle about **identity statements** that (in part) motivated descriptivism in the first place. The worry was that sentences like 'George Eliot is Mary Anne Evans' look tautologous on a Millian picture. Now, on the causal account, we can say that 'George Eliot' and 'Mary Anne Evans' have different meanings in virtue of having **different causal histories**.

3. **Putnam on Meaning**

Why should we think that the meanings of our words—in this case names—depends on how things are in the world? After all, you might think that, what *I* mean when I use a name should only depend on things in my head. And, a descriptivist account bears this out—what I mean by a name is nothing other than a particular description in my head. But on a causal-historical account of names, what I mean is partly going to depend on the causal history of the name that I use.

In "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", Putnam argues that, contrary to what you might think, meaning is not "in the head". To do this, he makes the famous **Twin Earth argument**.

Here, on Earth, the stuff we call 'water' is H_2O. Now imagine that there is another planet, Twin Earth, where there are English speakers. On Twin Earth, there is a liquid that speakers call 'water'. That liquid is what falls when it rains, what fills the oceans, what plants and animals need to live. It is indistinguishable in almost every way from H_2O. But it is not H_2O! It is instead made of different stuff—call this stuff 'XYZ'.

Note: for the rest of the argument to work, we must grant (with Putnam) that XYZ *is not water*.

Now imagine that an Earth astronaut visits Twin Earth. Putnam maintains that they would at first that 'water' means the same thing on Twin Earth as it does on Earth. Until, that is, they discover that 'water' on Twin Earth is XYZ (and not H_2O). This astronaut would say something like:

On Twin Earth, the word 'water' means XYZ.

And if the story were reverse, and it was instead an astronaut from Twin Earth who visited us. They would have a symmetrical experience, and would report:

On Earth, the word 'water' means H_2O.

In other words, 'water' in English and 'water' in Twinglish have **different extensions**.

With this established, to show that meaning is not in the head, Putnam needs to show that it is possible for two people to be in the **same psychological state**, and for their words to nevertheless have **different meanings**.

To show this, he imagines two individuals who live in 1750 (i.e. some time before the chemical make-up of water was discovered).

Suppose that Oscar lives on Earth and speaks English. Suppose that TwinOscar lives on Twin Earth and speaks Twinglish. Now, since the chemical make-up of the relevant liquids on Earth and Twin Earth have not been discovered yet, we can plausibly suppose that Oscar and TwinOscar have all **the same beliefs** about the stuff they each call 'water'. (e.g. they both believe 'water' to identify the stuff that falls when it rains, that fills the oceans, etc.)

Now, the *stuff* picked out by 'water' in English and Twinglish was exactly the same in 1750 as it is now. And in the first part of the case, it was established that 'water' in English picks out H_2O, while 'water' in Twinglish picks out XYZ.

From this, Putnam argues that it follows that Oscar and TwinOscar "understood the term 'water' differently in 1750 *although they were in the same psychological state*" (224, original emphasis). They each meant something different when they uttered 'water' even though what was "in their heads" was the same.

What does this have to do with the discussion of names? Well, we were looking for a reason to think that meanings might depend on things outside the speaker's head. And this argument provides one such reason. How the position holds for *all* parts of language is not important to us here. What matters for our purposes is that, if Putnam is right, it is at least the case that whenever a term or name is a **rigid designator** the meaning of that term or name will depend on what the world is like outside of the speaker.

Why should we think that *names* are rigid designators? We saw that a great many problems arose when we took names to be veiled descriptions (i.e. to **flexibly designate**). This gives us reason to think that names, however they get their meaning, rigidly designate. And on a causal-historical account of names, this is preserved. Since a name gets its meaning from its having a causal-history that begins with the dubbing of a particular entity, it could not dub a different entity and still be the same name.