

OUTLINE

Causal Theory of Names

This course will span **four** lectures. In it, we will explore causal theories of names (as the title suggests). We'll begin, though, with a summary of the descriptivist position and a survey of several objections to that position. We'll then move on to consider Saul Kripke, Gareth Evans, and Imogen Dickie on this topic.

- 1. Descriptivism and Objections**
- 2. Kripke's Causal Theory**
- 3. Objections to Kripke and Evans's Account**
- 4. Objections to Evans**

Lecture 1 Descriptivism & Objections

1. The Dialectic

To make sense of the causal theory of names and its motivations, it's important to understand the dialectic that came before it. Very briefly, the dialectic (that we're interested in for our current purposes) begins with the **Millian** theory of names on which names have **no meaning beyond their referents**. But there are a number of different problems that arise from this pleasingly straightforward picture.

Not least of these is the **problem of empty names**. If names get their meaning from their referents alone, and if empty names (and sentences containing them) are meaningful, then this picture seems to entail that our ontology must include objects for these empty names. (See also: Meinong on subsistence)

Another problem concerns the meaning of **identity statements** between two different names for the same object. E.g. 'Cicero is Tully.' These would turn out to be tautologies on the Millian picture, but intuitively are not so.

The **descriptive** theory of names was proposed, at least in part, in order to avoid the problems that arise from the Millian account.

And the **causal theory** of names, in turn, arises out of objections to the descriptive account.

2. Russell's Descriptivism

As will probably be familiar to you from other lectures, Russell proposes a theory of names on which they are **veiled definite descriptions**. So, for instance, the name 'Mary Wollstonecraft' *means* 'the Enlightenment philosopher who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*'. Or, formally:

$$\exists x \forall y ((Px \wedge Vx) \leftrightarrow x = y)$$

This makes sense of **empty names** because the names have meaning in virtue of expressing such a quantified statement. They merely express a *false* statement. Thus, something like 'Pegasus is a winged horse' is meaningful but false.

And it is meant to make sense of **identity statements** because the two different names may express different descriptions. Thus, the identity statements remain contingently true so long as it is contingently true that each description picks out the same object.

3. Objections to Russellian Descriptivism

We'll devote most of our time today to enumerating several objections to the descriptivist view.

Descriptions and Entailment

This objection comes from Searle (1958). He argues that the Russellian view presupposes that there is some unique referring description corresponding to each name. That is, if a name *means* some definite description, and we can use a name to refer to one and only one individual, then on the Russellian view, there must be a description that applies to one and only one individual. The trouble is, when we use a name, we rarely—if ever—have one such description in mind. This leads to some strange results.

Suppose for the sake of example that the following is a uniquely referring description of Mary Wollstonecraft (call it '**MW**' for ease of reference):

The person who was an Enlightenment philosopher,
who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,
who wrote *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, and
who was the mother of Mary Shelley.

$$\exists x \forall y ((Px \wedge Vx \wedge Tx \wedge Mx) \leftrightarrow x = y)$$

Now suppose someone says the following sentence:

(Eng) Mary Wollstonecraft was English.

On the Russellian view (Eng) *entails* MW. And perhaps even worse, if we suppose that I believe MW to hold of Mary Wollstonecraft, then if I assert (Eng) it turns out that I also assert MW! But this seems very odd. As Searle puts it:

to use a proper name referringly [on this view] is to presuppose the truth of certain uniquely referring descriptive statements, but it is not ordinarily to assert these statements or even to indicate which exactly are presupposed. (1958: 171)

Ambiguity

Often, if not always, we know (of) individuals under many different descriptions. For instance, some philosophy student may know of Mary Wollstonecraft under the description 'the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' while some English student may know of Wollstonecraft under the description 'the mother of Mary Shelley'. But if this is the case, then every name will be *wildly ambiguous* between any number of different referring descriptions. The problem here isn't just the mere fact of ambiguity (though, it is an undesirable result on its own, since names do not seem to be this ambiguous). The ambiguity also yields the result that sentences that should be contradictory cease to be so.

Suppose the philosophy student (P) and English student (E) disagree over whether Wollstonecraft was born in London. They utter the following:

P₁: *Mary Wollstonecraft was not born in London.*

E₁: *Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London.*

Intuitively, these two sentences should be contradictory. But if P and E only know Wollstonecraft under the descriptions we just said they did, then on the Russellian view, these two sentences mean the following:

P₂: *The author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman was not born in London.*

E₂: *The mother of Mary Shelley was born in London.*

But these sentences do not together lead entail a contradiction. Logically, they are consistent.

Kripke's Modal Objection

Kripke argues that names and definite descriptions differ *modally*. Loosely, names pick out the *same* individual across possible worlds, but descriptions do not. Consider the following propositions:

- (1) Mary Wollstonecraft might not have written *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.
- (2) Someone else could have written *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.
- (3) Mary Wollstonecraft might not have been Mary Wollstonecraft.
- (4) Someone else could have been Mary Wollstonecraft.

(1) and (2) sound true whereas (3) and (4) sound false. Kripke argues that this is because names are **rigid designators**. (3) and (4) sound odd to our ears because they are saying of some particular person that they may not have been *that very person*. On the other

hand (1) and (2) are saying of some person that they may have *failed to satisfy some description*. The problem for the Russellian then is that they **collapse** this distinction. On descriptivism to say (1) just is to say (3), since 'Mary Wollstonecraft' *means* (among other things) 'the person who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*'.

Kripke's Epistemic Objection

Consider the following propositions:

(5) If the author of *A Vindication* exists, then the author of *A Vindication* is the author of *A Vindication*.

(6) If the author of *A Vindication* exists, then Mary Wollstonecraft is the author of *A Vindication*.

It is clear that (5) is **knowable a priori**. Indeed, we can know a priori that any proposition of that form is true. Now, on the Russellian view, (5) and (6) are equivalent (if we suppose for the sake of simplicity that this description suffices for the meaning of 'Mary Wollstonecraft'). But (6) is clearly not knowable a priori.

Kripke's Semantic Objection

It seems as though we can successfully refer to someone even when we know them under a **false description**. For instance, many people think that Aretha Franklin is the writer of the song "Respect" when in fact Otis Redding wrote the song. Now, suppose someone who holds this (mistaken) belief says:

"Aretha Franklin was a great singer."

On descriptivism, this will mean:

'The writer of the song "Respect" was a great singer.'

But that description applies to Otis Redding, and not to Aretha Franklin. So on this view, in using the name 'Aretha Franklin' the person in question refers to Otis Redding. But, Kripke maintains, this is wrong. Even when someone has false beliefs about a referent, they can still successfully refer to that referent using the referent's name. (Donnellan (1970) also argues this.) Descriptivism entails that this is impossible.

True Claims about Fictional Entities

One of the motivations for descriptivism was to avoid commitment to the existence of fictional entities, while preserving the meaningfulness of sentences about such entities. It is effective at this, but the Russellian view achieves this by rendering all propositions about fictional entities **false**. But, intuitively, a proposition like the following one is true:

Luke Skywalker lived on Tatooine.

Recall that on the Russellian view, names are veiled *definite descriptions*—that is, veiled **existentially quantified** expressions. So, the above means:

There exists exactly one person who was Anakin's son,
and who trained with Yoda,
and that person lived on Tatooine.

But, of course, no such person exists. So the proposition is false. If two propositions have different truth-values, then they are not logically equivalent. So, the argument goes, it cannot be that 'Luke Skywalker lived on Tatooine' is equivalent to this quantified expression.