

A Kripkean Response to John Searle: Is Kripke Descriptivist?

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Descriptivism and rigid designation are two of the leading theories that discuss how proper names function. John Searle advocates the theory that proper names function as disguised definite descriptions (Searle, “Proper Names and Intentionality” 313–316),¹ whereas Saul Kripke² asserts that proper names function as rigid designators of the objects to which they refer (Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* 48).³ The purpose of this paper is to answer whether or not Kripke's theory is descriptivist at heart.⁴ To that end, I will first explain Kripke's theory of how proper names function, paying special attention to his concept of the baptism. I will then explain Searle's argument that Kripke's theory devolves into descriptivism, namely that Kripke's concept of the baptism (argument one) and concept of the causal chain (argument two) are fundamentally descriptivist (Searle 316). But, although Searle's arguments about the baptism and the causal chain are both interesting and engaging, I will only address the first. As such, I will formulate a Kripkean response to Searle's first argument and will show how Searle's particular argument fails to assimilate Kripke's theory into Searle's descriptivist model.

¹ This article will be cited by the author's last name followed by the page number.

² Kripke is constantly saying how he is not proposing a theory but rather a better picture. But everyone treats Kripke's position as a theory, so I will do the same.

³ This book will be cited by the author's last name followed by the page number.

⁴ This paper assumes that the reader has most of the background knowledge concerning this debate.

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To begin, I will explain Kripke's theory of how proper names function. Kripke claims proper names function as rigid designators (Kripke 48). That is, a proper name directly refers to the individual or object without any descriptive content from the proper name. For example, the proper name "Chuck Norris" directly refers to Chuck Norris regardless of what Chuck Norris does. The descriptivist theory asserts that "Chuck Norris" refers to Chuck Norris in virtue of descriptive content inherent in the proper name, content like "the man who played Walker Texas Ranger." Kripke says that "Chuck Norris" directly refers to Chuck Norris whether or not Chuck Norris played Walker Texas Ranger. To make this clearer, let us assume that Chuck Norris did not play Walker Texas Ranger. Would "Chuck Norris" still refer to Chuck Norris? Under the descriptivist theory, we must say no since "Chuck Norris" refers to "the man who played Walker Texas Ranger." But this is absurd because when we say "Chuck Norris" we are referring to that man regardless of what he has done. Hence, Kripke's theory is that "Chuck Norris" rigidly designates Chuck Norris irrespective of what Chuck Norris does. Thus, for Kripke, "Chuck Norris" refers to Chuck Norris in every possible world (Kripke 43).⁵

But now Kripke has to explain how proper names can refer without descriptive content. To answer this, Kripke's uses two concepts, the baptism and the causal chain (Kripke 91). To elucidate, let us consider an example. Suppose that we have an object or individual—like a baby—without a proper name. When we give that object or individual a proper name, we baptize that proper name such that it directly refers to that particular object or individual, in this case the baby, regardless of what happens to that object or individual. Eventually, the proper name will disseminate thorough some causal chain, and, as long as all individuals use the proper name in the same way that the person who disseminated it intended it to be used, the proper name will successfully designate the correct object or individual (Kripke 22–95).

But we still have not answered how a proper name can begin to directly refer without some sort of descriptive content. We know that a

⁵ Kripke has a very persuasive example. He shows how pi does not refer to the number 3.14 by means of its descriptive content, namely "the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter," but rather directly refers to 3.14 (Kripke 60). In fact, when people say "pi," most people think directly of 3.14 and have no idea of the descriptive content. This is one of the reasons why Kripke is so persuasive, as proper names function regardless of whether or not the user knows any descriptive content about the individual or the object that the proper name refers to.

proper name directly refers and we know that a proper name's rigid designation is initiated at some baptism. But how does it begin to refer? Do names not require some descriptive content at first? Kripke responds that, at the time of the initial baptism, the object may get its name by ostension (pointing) or may be fixed by some description (Searle 310). An example of this is pi, also known as the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter (Kripke 60). Both rigidly designate the same thing, namely 3.14. But is not the reference of pi, 3.14, fixed by the description the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter? It looks like this is true. Moreover, it looks like it is always true that the referent of a proper name is fixed at the time of baptism either by some description or ostention.

Searle argues that this is nothing more than descriptivism, thus making Kripke's theory descriptivist at heart (Searle 310). His argument is:

Premise 1: If proper names refer through descriptive content, then proper names have descriptive content.

Premise 2: If proper names do not refer through descriptive content, then proper names have a baptism.

Premise 3: If proper names have a baptism, then proper names refer through descriptive content.

Conclusion: Thus, proper names have descriptive content.⁶

Searle seems to have found a flaw in Kripke's theory. If proper names have a baptism, then they refer either through a description, which is certainly descriptivist, or through ostention. And since the object pointed at has descriptive content that uniquely picks it out, ostention also seems to refer in virtue of descriptive content (Searle 310). Thus, Kripke is a descriptivist.

But premise three seems faulty. Kripke does not say that, since the proper name has a baptism, the proper name refers through descriptive content.⁷ Kripke says that the baptism is used to fix the referent, which is entirely different. Let us consider one of Kripke's examples. Kripke talks about how the referent of a meter was fixed by the length of a certain stick at time zero (Kripke 55). According to Kripke, the word "meter" directly refers to 3.28 feet. That is, it rigidly designates 3.28 feet and will continue to rigidly designate 3.28 feet. So, according to Kripke, the word "meter"

⁶ There is an implied premise here, namely that proper names either refer through descriptive content or do not refer through descriptive content. But given the law of excluded middle, this is fine.

⁷ I think that Searle certainly implies this (Searle 310).

does not function through descriptive content but rather rigidly designates. To see why it does not function through descriptive content, consider the actual word "meter." When I say the word "meter," what comes to mind is not "the length of a certain stick at time zero." What comes to mind is 3.28 feet, a unit of measurement. So, it is clear that premise three is wrong. The word "meter" is not referring through descriptive content but rather its reference was only fixed by some descriptive content, and Kripke accepts this consequence willingly. Kripke, in fact, notices that proper names can first be fixed by description or ostension at some baptism (Searle 310). So, while Kripke would have a problem with Searle's argument that the proper name refers through descriptive content, he would not have (and explicitly states that he does not have) any problem with the argument that descriptive content can fix the referent (Kripke 55).

Here Searle can say that my analysis thus far is correct but only shows where the two theories diverge. At the point of fixing reference Kripke will say that a proper name rigidly designates. At the point of fixing reference Searle will say that the proper name still picks out an individual or object through descriptive content. Searle would concede that he should change his premise three and should change his conclusion to state that proper names refer through (and thus have) descriptive content at some point in time (the baptism). Now the question is whether or not this makes Kripke's theory fundamentally descriptivist (I think that Searle would argue that it does). However, while Kripke can maintain that proper names function as rigid designators after the baptism, it would be difficult to argue that Kripke is not a descriptivist if the most fundamental part of his theory (the baptism) requires descriptivism.

But is this even true? Does Kripke's theory require descriptivism? Can we even grant Searle this much? The argument that speaks in Searle's favor is that Kripke's theory loses all merit without definite descriptions since the definite descriptions fix the referent. Thus, it looks like it is only in virtue of descriptive content that a proper name can directly refer or can have its referent fixed, making Kripke's theory descriptivist. But I think that even this argument is incorrect. To see why, let us appeal to statistics. Suppose that we are doing a statistical analysis of how political corruption influences (maybe even causes) economic development. If we run a model it

does not matter what variable is the explanatory variable and what variable is the explained variable, the results are the same. So, for example, say we have political corruption explaining economic development and run this in a regression.⁸ Suppose that we run political corruption as the explanatory variable and it explains seventy-five percent of the variation in economic development. We can then run a model where economic development is the explanatory variable and political corruption is the explained variable. When we run this model, we will get the reverse answer, namely that economic development can explain seventy-five percent of the variation in economic development. Thus, for any given statistical model, there must be a causal model (some theoretical framework) or else the statistics mean essentially nothing (there can be no substantive conclusions, as either could be the explanatory variable).

So how does this relate to our problem? Well, let us first set up our problem and then show how our discussion relates to our problem such that we can solve it. In our problem, we are dealing with three things, namely objects (with the word being used in the widest sense of the term), descriptive content of objects, and the proper names of objects. Now, it appears that Kripke can only baptize proper names (fix the referent of a proper name such that it rigidly designates an object) in virtue of descriptive content. Thus, Kripke's theory seems to be descriptivist. But is this really so? I mentioned earlier that it is not. To show that this argument is faulty, we must find at least one case where a proper name can have its referent fixed either without any unique descriptive content or without any meaningful descriptive content. We need to show that at the time of baptism Kripke's theory is not functioning as a descriptivist theory and must find at least one case where a proper name refers without any unique descriptive content or without any meaningful descriptive content.

This is a difficult task since every object has descriptive content, But we also know that in every case where we baptize a proper name that there is a corresponding object, which has descriptive content. Thus, there is also descriptive content. So how do we show that a proper name can have its reference fixed without appealing to any unique descriptive content or without appealing to any meaningful descriptive content? Our only point of leverage here is to find an object where rigid designation occurs at bap-

⁸ A regression is simply a statistical tool to find out how much a given explanatory variable or several explanatory variables can actually explain (regarding the explained variable).

tism but where the object has either descriptive content that does not uniquely pick it out or descriptive content that is not meaningful at the baptism. This would show that something else is propelling the baptism. Under our current assumption, the descriptive content must fix the referent. If the descriptive content does not fix the referent at the time of baptism, then, under our assumption, the proper name does not rigidly designate, rendering the baptism worthless.

To see why this is the case under our current assumption, let us consider an example. Suppose that a male baby was born on April 22, 2006 that weighed twenty pounds. Also assume that this was the only baby that weighed twenty pounds that was born on April 22, 2006. We want to call this baby "Charlie." Thus, at the baptism we fix the referent of "Charlie" as "the baby born on April 22, 2006 that weighed twenty pounds." Since "Charlie" is now co-referential with "the baby born on April 22, 2006 that weighed twenty pounds" and since this uniquely describes Charlie, the baptism was successful. But consider that another baby was born April 22, 2006 that weighed twenty pounds and assume that we did not baptize by ostension. Clearly "Charlie" does not rigidly designate since our unique descriptive content cannot pick out who "Charlie" rigidly designates. Thus, the baptism is a failure.

So we need to show that this model above is incorrect. If we show at least one case where we rigidly designate an object without either unique descriptive content or without meaningful descriptive content, then we can show that the baptism is not propelled by descriptive content but rather something else. So, to solve this problem, let us treat our three terms as variables in a statistical analysis. We know that proper names cannot be the explanatory variable since having a proper name does not impact whether or not something has unique descriptive content or is an object. What we want to do is use unique descriptive content (functioning also as meaningful descriptive content) and object as explanatory variables to see how well they explain whether or not something has a proper name. Now, we know that proper names depend on objects. That is, we know that the explanatory variable "object" will perfectly explain proper names. This is because in every instance of a proper name there is a corresponding object.⁹ Thus, the

⁹ This is Kripke's argument that if "x" is a proper name, then x exists. I think that this argument is persuasive and do not think that there is evidence of an instance where a proper name (functioning in Kripke's sense) has no object.

two are perfectly correlated.

What we do not know (but are looking to find), is an instance where there is a baptism but either no unique descriptive content or no meaningful descriptive content. If we find one instance where there is a baptism with either no unique descriptive content or no meaningful descriptive content, then, since every object has descriptive content, we can conclude that the real driving force behind Kripke's baptism is the object and not the descriptive content. This would both render Searle's argument wrong and would vindicate Kripke as a non-descriptivist. It would, in fact, only reinforce Kripke's theory that the reference of proper name is rigid. Moreover, it would show that a proper name is only co-referential with descriptive content at a given time, never functioning through it.

But this now brings up the next obvious question. Can we ever baptize a name without either unique descriptive content or meaningful descriptive content? I argue that there are, in fact, many instances where we can baptize a proper name without either unique descriptive content or meaningful descriptive content. In fact, virtually any case where there is a type/token distinction, whether it is a case of twins or a case of stuffed giraffes, should allow us to baptize a proper name without either unique descriptive content or meaningful descriptive content. Specifically, let us consider an example of male twins that have not been given names yet. Also, suppose that these twins are identical twins. Now, Searle's sense of descriptive content comes in two forms. The first form is direct perception, like hair color, eye color, etc. The second form is of things generally associated with an individual, like playing Walker Texas Ranger on television. It is clear that there is no unique descriptive content of the first form since the two individuals are twins. But is there unique descriptive content of the second form? If so, then we need to see if the unique descriptive content is meaningful. If not, then Kripke is vindicated from the allegations that his theory is descriptivist.

It looks like, in this case, there is still descriptive content of the second form since one baby had to be born first and the other had to be born second. Therefore, at the time of baptism, the temporal agent can be used as the unique descriptive content to fix the referent. In fact, it does not look like there is any way around this since, during any baptism, we can

always use either a temporal agent or location to give unique descriptive content. This is because no two objects can uniquely occupy the same location on the same physical plane and because there are no two identical points in time. So how do we overcome our problem? We need to find a case where there is an object that can be baptized with a proper name without any meaningful descriptive content.

But does this ever happen? Of course! Consider again the hospital example with the set of male twins (or any example that utilizes the type/token distinction).¹⁰ Is the unique descriptive content meaningful? Surely not! When the rigid designation occurs at the baptism, no one cares what baby came out at time zero and what baby came out at time one. The only thing that anyone cares about is the rigid designation of objects with proper names. If descriptive content was meaningful in all cases, then, with the amount of misplaced babies given out, roughly 1.3 percent of people have the wrong proper name. Thus, the descriptive content is not always meaningful at the time of baptism. In fact, the only reason that unique descriptive content is used is for practicality. The object, in fact, is what really propels the rigid designation at the baptism.

To see why this is the case, let us consider an example of a mother, Sophie, and her child. In this particular case, the mother is given back the wrong child. At the time of baptism, it seems reasonable to say that Sophie would hold that the unique descriptive content for her baby is that she birthed him or her on some given date. But, while this is obviously wrong, the baptism would still work on that baby and not on the child that Sophie actually birthed. Thus, the argument falls back into one of Kripke's other arguments against Searle, namely that the unique descriptive content can be wrong. In this case, surely the descriptive content is meaningless since it is wrong. And surely no one would question the legitimacy of fixing the referent with this unique descriptive content since it seems so certain and might be the only unique descriptive content available. Therefore, we have found a case where we can baptize without meaningful descriptive content, showing that the object, not the descriptive content, is propelling the baptism. In addition, this example shows that since it is the object that is propelling the baptism, at no time is a proper name functioning through a

¹⁰ Think of the type/token distinction in terms of the arcade. At the arcade, one gets many tokens, usually of one type. The word "Racecar," for example, contains seven tokens (seven letters) of four types (namely 'r', 'a', 'c', and 'e').

description. Rather the proper name only happens to be co-referential with the description.

Searle may then object and say that this baptism would take place because of ostension and thus is still descriptivist. But this is obviously wrong. Just as a proper name directly refers to and rigidly designates an object, pointing to an object also directly refers to the object pointed to. I am not sure that there is any more direct reference (rigid designation) than pointing even with proper names. So it seems that we can still correctly assert that a baptism works because of the object, not the unique descriptive content.

But, now that we have shown that Kripke's theory always functions because of an object and not the attached descriptive content, Searle could make one last attempt to show how the baptism of a proper name functions through descriptive content. His objection would be that there is descriptive content inherent in proper names in general, not as proper names relate to any specific individual. To see how this argument works out, let us consider an example. Suppose that we have a couple and that this couple is about to have a child. Assume that this child is a girl and that the mother and father to be name the child "Katie." That is, the mother and father baptize the name "Katie" so as to rigidly designate the individual Katie. Is this example fundamentally descriptivist? The argument that speaks in its favor is that the name "Katie" certainly has a girlish feel or tone (charge?) to it. But I maintain that this example does not show that descriptive content is inherent in proper names generally.¹¹

To see why, let us first see why Searle might think so. Let us consider that this example comes from, say, the sixteenth century when there was not all the technological advances of today. Thus, it is probable that the mother and father chose two names for the baby before birth, one if it was

¹¹ I am using this specific example as a generalization to refute all analogous examples. Kripke says that the proper name "Hitler," while it seems to possess some tone, probably does not. But I still think that we need to make sense of why "Hitler" sends a chill down our spine or why "Katie" makes us think of a female if we are to accept Kripke's theory. It could be the case on Kripke's theory that a proper name rigidly designates an object, which we then think of in terms of some descriptive content, which then gives us a certain feeling, seemingly reflecting some charge in the word. However, it is not the word that has a charge but the thought of the actual descriptive content of the object that has the charge. We just mistake it for being in the word. In Katie's case (in any case where we might not know the individual), the word "Katie" is probably linked to female based on probability and not on descriptive content.

a boy and the other if it was a girl. But does this mean that proper names have descriptive content? Perhaps! It is clear that we think that names like "Katie" are girls' names and that names like "John" are boys' names; however, this is not descriptive content in Searle's sense. Searle's sense of descriptive content is supposed to uniquely pick out an individual. Now, while it is clear that "John" and "Katie" have descriptive content of the first form, specifically picking out some anatomically unique property of that gender, it is not functioning to uniquely pick out "John" or "Katie." Thus, while the names seem to have descriptive content, the descriptive content does not seem to be of Searle's type and so is irrelevant to the debate.

Moreover, to agree with Searle that proper names have descriptive content, one would also have to agree that the descriptive content associated with any particular proper name is relatively infallible. To consider an example, let us take the name "Aristotle." "Aristotle" refers to Aristotle, the man who taught Alexander the Great. "The man who taught Alexander the Great" seems to uniquely pick out Aristotle. And, to agree that descriptive content picks out the individual referred to by "Aristotle," we would have to be absolutely sure that Aristotle taught Alexander the Great, else we seem to be referring to someone we do not even know. But this does not seem to be the case with the examples of "John" or "Katie." An example of this is Hilary Putnam, a male who, upon first hearing the name, is probably thought to be female. So it seems that this descriptive content can be fallible. To reinforce this position, consider that the descriptive content of names is in a constant state of flux, something Searle could not accept. For example, the name "Ashley" usually refers to a female. However, it is becoming more common for the name "Ashley" to refer to a male. Searle's theory cannot tolerate this successfully. If "the man who taught Alexander the Great" uniquely picks out Aristotle, Searle would have a hard time making the case that "Aristotle" now uniquely picks out "the man who did not teach Alexander the Great."

In sum, we have seen that John Searle's concern that Saul Kripke's concept of the baptism is fundamentally descriptivist is logical. As such, the argument seems to show that Kripke's theory devolves into descriptivism. However, we have also shown that Searle is mistaken. Kripke never uses a proper name to refer through a descriptive content. Instead, Kripke uses

¹² Modern definitions of gender might challenge this, but my point remains clear.

descriptive content merely to fix the reference. Some may argue that this still makes Kripke a descriptivist at heart; however, we have also shown that Kripke only uses unique descriptive content to fix the referent out of practicality. Thus, while a proper name and a description may be co-referential at some point in time, at no time does the proper name function through the description. In fact, the real driving force behind every baptism is not the descriptive content, as is illustrated by the fact that a baptism can take place in virtue of meaningless descriptive content, but rather the actual object, in the widest sense of the term. Thus, Kripke's theory is not at all descriptivist, but rather is fundamentally rigid. And this does not only apply to singular proper names like "Aristotle" but also to classes of proper names as is illustrated by names like "Katie" and "John."

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