MCKINSEY ON KRIPKE'S ASSAULT ON CLUSTER THEORIES

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Abstract

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This paper attempts to undermine Michael McKinsey's important objections to Kripke's attempts to refute cluster versions of description theories of name reference. McKinsey argues that Kripke ignores descriptions to which a cluster theorist might appeal in constructing his counterexamples, but that these same descriptions are what guide our intuitions in evaluating the examples. I argue that the descriptions McKinsey offers are question-begging, and thus of no help to a cluster theorist. In a second brief section, I offer an argument designed to show that even if McKinsey's descriptions were legitimate, the views Kripke endorses in "Naming and Necessity" would be supported rather than vitiated.
McKinsey on Kripke's Assault on Cluster Theories

Kripke, Michael McKinsey has argued, has not provided any counterexamples to the (or perhaps better a) cluster version of description theories of name reference. In the first section of this paper, I will defend Kripke's examples against McKinsey's argument. In the second section I will suggest that even if McKinsey were right about the version of the cluster theory he endorses, the view of names Kripke has presented would not be impugned.

I

The principle that McKinsey takes to be at issue between Kripke and cluster theorists is as follows. For every speaker (s), token α of a proper name, individual x, and time t,

(CD) if s utters α at t and s is not immediately experiencing
x at t, then α refers to (denotes) x only if there is a property F such that
(i) x is the one and only individual that is F; (ii) at t, s believes that there is just one individual that is F; and
(iii) the property of being F is not question-begging with respect to s's use of α at t.

McKinsey claims that Kripke's cases "do not pose conclusive counterexamples to the cluster theory principle (CD)", and argues for this by trying to show that the now-famous Gödel example does not show that (CD) is false. The example proceeds on the supposition that the proof of the incompleteness of arithmetic was not due to Gödel (there are various versions—because it miraculously appeared on a piece of paper Gödel found, because the proof contains a subtle undetected error, or because Gödel stole it from an obscure and mysteriously murdered Viennese named Schmidt), and that the only description speakers can provide for the name is 'the man who discovered the incompleteness of


arithmetic. Kripke claims that such speakers would nonetheless be referring to Gödel, and if so, (CD) is false.³

This, McKinsey claims, forces us to rule out the natural assumption that s will have other beliefs about the referent of the name, in particular, the beliefs that the referent satisfies these descriptions: (a) the man to whom the discovery of arithmetic's incompleteness is commonly attributed; (b) the man of whom I have heard (read) that he discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic; (c) the only man named 'Gödel' of whom I have heard; and (d) the man named 'Gödel' of whom I have heard (read) that he discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic.⁴

But now McKinsey raises the 'sinister possibility' that our intuition that Gödel is the referent of s's use of 'Gödel' is guided by tacit, but quite illegitimate, appeal to (a)-(d), with the result that "Kripke's claim might seem intuitively correct only because it is the correct claim to make on the cluster theory".

He argues that this is exactly what happens by asking us to rule out appeal to (a)-(d) explicitly:⁵

Imagine, for instance, that s uses 'Gödel' with the intention of referring to the discoverer of incompleteness, but s believes both that he has never in his life heard of anyone named 'Gödel' and that he has never heard the proof of incompleteness attributed to anyone named 'Gödel'. What would s be doing using 'Gödel' in such circumstances? We can only assume that by some wild coincidence s just happened to pick the name 'Gödel' and decided to use it to refer to the discoverer of incompleteness (perhaps he just happened to like the sound of 'Gödel').

But now, McKinsey argues, intuition informs us that (in the theft version) Schmidt is the referent of 'Gödel' (in the miraculous and error versions, no one is the referent). And if so, Kripke's case seems to show nothing about (CD). So a dilemma is posed: either the speaker is not prepared to offer descriptions (a)-(d), in which case Kripke's intuition is wrong, or else he is prepared to offer (a)-(d), in which case there are descriptions at his command that pick out the intuitively

³Kripke, Naming, pp. 295-299.
⁴McKinsey, Kripke's Objections, p. 488. I am not convinced that being the only Gödel of whom I have heard is among Gödel's properties, but I shall not press the point here.
⁵McKinsey, Kripke's Objections, pp. 488-489.
correct referent. McKinsey's suggestion, then, is that a cluster theorist need only avail himself of descriptions (a)-(d) to rob Kripke's objections of their force.

What McKinsey has failed to realize, however, is that this revision of the cluster theory is one which Kripke has anticipated and replied to. McKinsey finds it puzzling that after introducing the Gödel example Kripke goes on to consider the reply that the speaker might have had in mind some other descriptions the referent does satisfy, since, he thinks, this appears to be the suggestion that there might be examples that are not counterexamples, which "has no bearing on the issue of whether the case Kripke does give provides a counterexample". But in the passage McKinsey cites, Kripke is asking whether the description theory can be rescued, and pointing out that one of its proponents might "try and vary these descriptions", that is, the set of descriptions to which a cluster theorist may appeal. Kripke then proceeds to offer a different criticism of the proposed amendment to the theory, which does not seem particularly puzzling. Kripke's criticism is that such descriptions are question-begging (circular, in his terminology).

Kripke says, concerning the description McKinsey labels (a), that if we merely appeal to 'the man to whom the incompleteness of arithmetic is commonly attributed', "...all we will be saying is, 'We attribute this achievement to the man to whom we attribute it', without saying who that man is, without giving any independent criterion of the reference, and so the determination will be circular". He would presumably make the same allegation about the other descriptions McKinsey mentions, and it seems fairly clear that the allegation is correct. The descriptions McKinsey offers give us no more than various versions of 'whoever it is I'm talking about', and appeal to them is therefore question-begging or circular. Hence (CD) has been refuted by Kripke's example.

There are other examples Kripke employs earlier in his paper to directly attack (CD); McKinsey ignores these, but presumably his response would be similar, and similarly flawed. Against Kripke's suggestion that speakers use names such as 'Feynman', 'Cicero' and 'Einstein' for

7 Kripke, Naming, p. 296.
8 Kripke, Naming, p. 297.
which they can provide no individuating descriptions, McKinsey would probably maintain that such speakers could always produce descriptions similar to (a)-(d). I am not even sure this is true ('the man named "Roosevelt" of whom I have heard that he was a U.S. President?'), but if it is these descriptions will be of no use in these cases either.

While I think that this much decides the point at issue between Kripke and McKinsey, I would like to add that what is really called for here is a discussion of the epistemological assumptions that lie behind the description theory, which would take up far more space than this paper will bear. Briefly, though, I think that description theorists have committed themselves to the following: (i) to be able to refer to \( x \) with 'N' requires knowing who \( x \) is, and (ii) knowing who \( x \) is requires having at one's command a description that uniquely individuates \( x \). The requirement of non-circularity or non-question-begging then becomes a self-imposed restriction guaranteeing that (i) and (ii) are satisfied; someone who offers 'whoever it is who...' clearly violates these restrictions. While I am pretty sure that (i) or (ii) is false, the argument would take us far afield of the present point, and I doubt that anyone who gave one of them up would retain much affection for the description theory.

My conclusion thus far, then, is that McKinsey's attempt to refurbish cluster theories turns on the introduction of descriptions that have already, and correctly, been identified as circular, so that McKinsey's revitalization violates clause (iii) of (CD). Before leaving this section of the paper, I think it worthwhile to indicate two other points on which McKinsey seems to have misunderstood Kripke. The first concerns the attempt to avoid circularity by 'passing the buck' a la Strawson.10

In his remarks on the suggestion that a speaker's reference may 'borrow its credentials' from the uses of others, Kripke insists that Strawson must claim that the speaker must know from whom he got his reference for this suggestion to succeed, and McKinsey finds this insistence unjustifiable.11 Initially, this seems persuasive; in general there seems to be no reason at all why a cluster theorist should have to impose such a requirement on himself. This, however, ignores the context of Kripke's remark. He was discussing a specific example,

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9 Kripke, Naming, pp. 291-293.

10 Kripke, Naming, pp. 297-300. (For Strawson's suggestions, see P. F. Strawson, Individuals, London, Methuen (1959), Chapter 6.)

not generalities, and one in which it appears to be the cluster theorist's burden to come up with a non-circular description individuating the referent of 'Gödel'. Kripke has already argued that (a)-(d) are circular at this point, so that he thinks the only choice left to a cluster theorist is a specification of the speaker's source of the name: given this, such a theorist must indeed say that the speaker knows from whom he got the name, what his source of it is. Otherwise he is left with something on the order of 'the man somebody or other was referring to at some time or other', which hardly uniquely identifies someone.

The second point which McKinsey seems to miss is that Kripke agrees with him about the idiosyncratic use of 'Gödel' he describes; Kripke says that if you just decide to use the name to mean the man, whoever he is, who proved incompleteness, "... then if Schmidt discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic you do refer to him when you say 'Gödel did such and such'". His point about the other, non-idiosyncratic uses, once again, is that there are no non-circular descriptions to which a description theorist might appeal to bring his theory in line with our intuitions. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that the speaker would offer (a)-(d), and thus does not force us to treat Kripke's example as if it exemplified the idiosyncratic use of the name. Thus the dilemma McKinsey attempts, that either the descriptions would not be offered by the speaker or the cluster theory can embrace them, cannot be generated.

If all this is correct, it is surely a mistake to say that Kripke has offered 'no relevant objection' to those who would try to patch up the cluster theory in the way McKinsey favors.

II

Now I want to raise the question of whether it would make any difference to the plausibility of Kripke's own views about name reference if McKinsey were right, and argue for a negative answer. Suppose then that my criticisms in section I are mistaken, and that cluster theorists may legitimately appeal to descriptions such as (a)-(d).

The first point to note is that a theory which countenances appeal to such descriptions, while doubtless a description theory of sorts, is radically different from the sort of view Kripke sought to refute. The next step is to see exactly where the disparity resides: the dif-

12 Kripke, Naming, p. 298.
ference between the sort of descriptions cluster theorists have traditionally offered and (a)-(d) is that the latter specify the speaker's historico-causal connection with the name and its referent. Once we see this, I think it becomes clear that a point that has been made by Evans is decisive—there is no explanation to be given of why these descriptions cannot be outweighed by whatever others a speaker might have available (those that uncontroversially describe properties of the referent). Any benefits that might accrue from this go, surely, to causal theorists. If the reconstrual of (CD) McKinsey offers were true, it would point to the truth of the sort of view Kripke sketches in "Naming and Necessity", and not to the view attacked there. Whether we should still say that there would be a true version of the cluster theory in spite of the differences with more traditional cluster theories would be of relatively little interest.

Perhaps the best way to convey the point is by an analogy. Suppose that someone proposed a description theory of perception, according to which 'S sees o' is true only if S can provide a description that qualitatively individuates o. Presented with optical illusions and other cases in which what is seen would be misdescribed, the author of this proposal might then claim that the perceiver can fall back on the description 'the object that is now exciting my visual receptors'. This would do his original suggestion no good, and a proponent of a causal theory of perception no ill.

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14. Some description theory will be true if there is any correct theory of reference; cf. a point of Nozick's reported by Kripke in Naming, p. 349n.

15. As McKinsey's paper is a companion piece to his "Names and Intentionality", Philosophical Review, 87 (1978), pp. 171-200, this paper supplements my criticism in "McKinsey, Causes and Intentions", Philosophical Review, 88 (1979), pp. 619-32. I wish to thank Lilly Russow and James W. Stephens for discussion that was helpful in preparing this paper (and, belatedly, the previously mentioned one).