Kripke 1980, *Naming and Necessity* on Necessity vs. *A Priority*

KEVIN DORST   April 7, 2015

I. Three Distinctions

1) *A priori* truths

From epistemology: "*a priori* truths are those which can be known independently of experience" (34).

Enabling vs. *justifying* use of experience. Contrast knowing (i) that all scarlet things are red vs. (ii) that all emeralds are green.

> Issues with the embedded modality. "Can" be known by whom? Clearly shouldn't be a "must" – "computing machines" (35). Stick to whether a particular person knows it a priori or not.

2) Necessary truths

From metaphysics "in some (I hope) nonpejorative sense" (35-6). We ask whether something could have been true, or could have been false.

Is this just a philosopher's cooked-up notion?

> "it is very far from being true that this idea... is a notion which has no intuitive content, which means nothing to the ordinary man. Suppose that someone said, pointing to Nixon, 'That's the guy who might have lost.' Someone else says 'Oh no, if you describe him as "Nixon" then he might have lost; but of course describing him as the winner, then it is not true that he might have lost.' Now which one is being the philosopher, here, the unintuitive man?" (41)

> Kripke thinks that regarding the *meaningfulness* of a concept, the best evidence we can have is appealing to ordinary thought and talk. This is, of course, separate from the question of the concept's *extension* (42).

3) Analytic truths

Stipulative: true in virtue of meaning in all possible worlds. (39)

> We'll come back to what this amounts to once we are semantic externalists.

II. Claim 1: Conceptually Distinct

> "The terms are often used as if *whether* there are things answering to these concepts is an interesting question, but we might as well regard them as all meaning the same thing." (34)

Ask about whether Nixon might have lost: "This in and of itself has nothing to do with anyone's knowledge of anything" – it is a philosophical thesis that the *a priori* truths coincide with the necessary ones.

Why have they been thought to coincide? (38)

1) "if something not only happens to be true in the actual world but is also true in all possible worlds, then, of course, just by running through all the possible worlds in our heads, we ought to be able

with enough effort to see, if a statement is necessary, that it is necessary, and thus know it *a priori*. But really this is not so obviously feasible at all." (38)

2) "if something is known a priori it must be necessary, because it was known without looking at the world. If it depended on some contingent feature of the actuals world, how could you know it without looking?" (38)

> Bound up with controversial issue in epistemology. Maybe you can tell a story, but it's not going to be a *trivial* one!

Q: How big of a step forward was this? E.g. the positivists clearly had a substantive picture which led to their equation, i.e. that there are two classes of truths: (1) synthetic, contingent, a priori (mathematics), and (2) analytic, necessary, and a priori (mathematics, philosophy). This follows from substantive claims about the verifiability criterion of meaning and the way science works.

Is this tied up with the issues about what possible worlds are? If (prior to Kripke) people thought there was no distinction between metaphysical and epistemological possibility, then it's very natural to think we *would* have all the worlds "in our heads."

III. Claim 2: Extensionally Distinct

Sometimes wrapped up in Claim 1.

Claim: there are contingent *a priori* claims, and necessary *a posteriori* claims. Various arguments:

I agree, basically. But I think it's worth looking closely at the arguments he gives, pressing back a bit, and seeing what happens.

A. Goldbach's conjecture. Either necessarily true or necessarily false, but no one has *a priori* knowledge either way. (37)

> Response: *of course* what's *actually* known *a priori* doesn't coincide with what's necessary – hence the need for the modal 'can' in the definition of *a priori*.

> Kripke acknowledges this. But what if there's no proof? Maybe only an infinite mind could run through all the numbers; not clear that a finite mind could know this *a priori*.

Response: The theorems of F-O logic are *a priori*, but whether something is a theorem is not computable, so no guarantee that a finite mind could figure it out. So looks like *a priori* truths can't build in finite-mind constraints.

B. Nixon and tables.

> It seems an open question whether Nixon is *necessarily* human, given that he is human. But it is clearly not an open question whether it is *a priori* that Nixon is human – after all, it could still turn out that he's an automaton! (47):

> (i) "If Nixon human, he is necessarily human."   →   Maybe true.

> (ii) "If Nixon is human, it is *a priori* that he's human."   →   Definitely false.

> (iii) "It's *a priori* that: if Nixon is human, he is human." →   Definitely true.

Similarly: This table is composed of molecules, and that was a momentous scientific discovery. "But could anything be this very object

and not be composed of molecules?" It seems not, in which case it is necessarily composed of molecules, but not a priori composed of them.

C. Rigid designation and reference-fixing

The real way to open the door to examples is making two distinctions: (1) rigid vs. non-rigid designators, and (2) *giving the meaning* vs. *fixing the reference* of a term. (48, 55)

'The number of planets' vs. '8'. Thesis: names in natural language are rigid: "although someone other than the U.S. President in 1970 might have been the U.S. President in 1970... no one other than Nixon might have been Nixon." (48)

> True even if we make it a big disjunction of Nixon's characteristics.

Stipulate 'one meter' to refer to the length of Stick S (54). Is 'Stick S is one meter long' a necessary truth? No – it could have been longer! ("If heat had been applied...")

> This stipulation does not give the meaning; it just uses an accidental property to fix the reference. **Language is sticky.**

With this in mind, we get examples:

(iv) "Stick S is one meter long."   →

> Contingent *a priori*.

This is opened up because of our two new distinctions. 'The length of stick S' is a non-rigid designator for one meter, while 'one meter' is a rigid designator. And this is possible even if we *define* 'one meter' with reference to stick S because we are able to fix the reference without equating meanings.

(v) "Nixon is human." or "Water is H_2O."   →

> Necessary *a posteriori*.

"Water' is the stuff in our ponds' fixes the reference, but does not give the meaning. And since names for natural kinds are rigid designators, while 'stuff in our ponds' is not, these two can come apart in different worlds.

IV. Some Resistance

> I want to push back a bit against these cases to try to get a handle on how robust they are.

A. The contingent a priori.

Claim: (iv) 'Stick S is one meter long' is *not* a priori, even for a Superbaby who coins it in this way. She does *not* know "without further investigation" (56) that this is so.

First: Superbaby can't know without experience that there is any stick that is picked out by 'Stick S', so she can't know that her stipulation succeeded in doing anything.

> Compare: Superbaby comes out of the womb and says, 'Let 'Julius' refer to the inventor of the zipper.' For all Superbaby knows, there are two such inventors, or no inventor (or no zipper!). This is not knowledge.

Second: If Kripkean causal theories of reference are right, I can't even *refer* to objects or properties without being in causal contact with them. So things like 'Stick S', or relevant descriptions, won't be semantically accessible to me *a priori*.

> Maybe a merely enabling role of experience, here?

<u>Third:</u> what if we build the relevant conditions in? Maybe Superbaby doesn't know (iv), but she does know something like

(vi) "If I succeeded in referring with the term 'the length of Stick S', then Stick S is one meter long."

<u>Problem:</u> (vii) "If I fixed the reference of 'one meter' by equating it with 'the length of Stick S', and I succeeded in referring with 'the length of Stick S', then Stick S is one meter long" *is* a necessary truth, since the meaning-fixing facts are necessary. And *this* is all Superbaby knows *a priori*.

She detaches from the first condition because she knows it to be true *from her experience of coining the term*. So (vi) is not truly *a priori*, and (vii) *is a priori*, but is also necessary.

B. *The necessary a posteriori*

Kripke led us to be semantic externalists – the meaning of a term is not always accessible to a speaker. Sometimes it depends on contingent facts about her environment. Does that cause trouble?

The semantic value of 'Nixon' is *that man*, and that man is necessarily human; so why isn't it true in virtue of (externalist) meaning that 'Nixon is human'?

Moreover, we always agreed that determining *a priority* required the relevant agent to know what her words meant. But given that we're externalists, anyone who doesn't know that 'Nixon' refers to a *man* does not know what her words mean! And if we added *that* knowledge, she would know *a priori* that Nixon is human.

Recall the red/scarlet example.

Even if these points are accepted, I'm not sure if they do more than deviate from the letter of the account. Clearly much/most of the spirit of Kripke is retained; though perhaps it resists some of the more metaphysically heavy conclusions drawn.

After all, in a sense we retain the thought that all necessity is linguistic necessity.