



On Causal Theories of Proper Names

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The purpose of this paper is to examine and critique Evans' and Devitt's post-Kripkean theories of naming. I argue that both authors correctly identify a crucial error in Kripke's causal picture of naming: his claim that initial baptisms are necessary for the reference of proper names. However, I claim that Evans' theory produces unintuitive results when faced with two problems: the "qua-problem" and the problem of incorrect causal source. I suggest that these issues arise due to his claim that the reference of a proper name is its dominant causal source of information. Finally, I argue that Devitt's theory deals successfully with these issues by allowing for multiple groundings and by specifying the importance of referring to an object under a correct "kind" term.

Key Words: Reference, naming, proper names, causal theory of reference, Evans, Devitt

The publication of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, led to widespread acceptance that descriptivist theories of naming were fundamentally undermined. However, Kripke's causal picture of naming has since faced significant opposition. Post-Kripkean theories of naming incorporate both causal and descriptive elements. This paper examines and compares two hybrid theories of naming defended by Devitt and Evans.

Section One provides context by exploring Kripke's main objection against the descriptivist theory and introduces his causal picture of names. Section Two explicates Evans' main objection to Kripke's causal picture, and Evans' hybrid theory of names. Furthermore, two objections to Evans' theory are ventured, the "qua-problem" and the problem of incorrect causal source. Section Three, turns to Devitt's theory of names and explains how it avoids the issues with both Evans' and Kripke's theories. Section Four, concludes by arguing that Devitt's theory is successful in including insights provided by both Evans and Kripke, while avoiding the problems faced by their theories.

I. Kripke's Critique and the Causal Picture of Naming

Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, critiques the descriptivist theory of proper names and, suggests an alternative, causal picture of naming. According to Kripke¹, the descriptivists provide theories for both the meaning and the reference of proper names. Descriptivists claim that associated with each name is a cluster of descriptions. This cluster of descriptions is what expresses the meaning and determines the referent of a name. In more precise terms, a person X who utters a name N believes that the cluster of definite

¹ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, (1972).

descriptions which he associates with N will uniquely pick out some object Y. X's use of N is successful in referring to Y if the associated cluster of descriptions in fact uniquely fits Y, otherwise it refers to whatever object best fits that associated cluster of descriptions ².

Kripke argued that this theory of names is fundamentally flawed. Kripke proposes a thought experiment, the "Gödel and Schmidt" example. As Kripke points out ³, most people who know of the mathematician Gödel, know him only as "the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic". Now, suppose that Gödel was not the real author of the incompleteness theorem. Instead, he plagiarized it from his friend "Schmidt" who died a few years earlier, and passed them off as his own. Faced with this example, Kripke claims that the descriptivist theory appears to produce an unintuitive result: it would seem that whenever someone who knows Gödel only as "the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic" utters his name, he is actually referring to Schmidt, as Schmidt is the only person who uniquely fits that description. Intuitively, it would seem that the man still refers to Gödel, and thus, Kripke claims, the descriptivist theory should be rejected, as it does not provide sufficient conditions for reference.

Thus, Kripke⁴ criticizes the central tenant of the descriptivist theory: that it is a cluster of descriptions associated with each name which expresses sense and determines reference. As an alternative, he sketches a causal picture of names with two components: reference fixing and reference borrowing ⁵. First, during reference-fixing an object acquires a name by virtue of an "initial baptism". In this event, the reference of a name is fixed to some object by an individual who is in the presence of the object. This is done either by ostensive definition, such as physically pointing to the object and saying something like "I name you John", or by description, as in "I name the baby over there with the red hat, John"⁶. Reference-borrowing then occurs when the name is passed along by a "causal chain of communication" and spreads throughout a social network ⁷. So long as each individual who hears the name John intends to use the name to refer to the same object as from whom he heard it, then the causal chain is preserved, thereby allowing for "John" to successfully refer to the baby with the red hat.

However, Kripke does not claim to have fully fleshed out a causal theory of names. For instance, he provides examples which his theory does not seem able to account for. For instance, it does not appear that the causal picture can explain how the name "Santa Claus" changed its reference from a fictional character instead of the medieval saint to which it

² Ibid., 294.

³ Ibid., 298.

⁴ Ibid., 300.

⁵ Devitt and Sterelny, *Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, 55.

⁶ It is important to note that reference fixing via description is different than descriptivist theories. The description is not synonymous with the name, it is used *merely* to fix the referent.

⁷ Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," 300.

originally referred ⁸. Furthermore, Kripke only gives us an account of the reference of names, and not of their meanings.

II. Hybrid Theories of Names: Evans

Evans ⁹ distinguishes between two questions regarding the reference of proper names and provides theories for each: the question of speaker's reference and of a particular name's reference. The former deals with what the use of a name by a speaker refers to on a particular occasion of use, the latter with the conditions which must obtain for some utterance to become the name of an object amongst a community of speakers.

Evans agrees with Kripke's critique of the descriptivist theory. However he argues that it only challenges the descriptivist theory of speaker's reference, not of a name's reference. Furthermore, he disagrees with Kripke's causal picture on certain fundamental points. In particular, he notes that Kripke's causal theory generates unintuitive results when faced with cases of reference-change due to error ¹⁰. Evans ¹¹ gives us an example of an actual case of reference-change: the referent of the name "Madagascar". According to him, the name "Madagascar" used to refer to a part of continental Africa. However, Marco Polo misunderstood the name to refer to the great island off of the southeastern coast of Africa. However, assuming that Marco Polo intended to use the name as the Arab sailors did, then there exists an unbroken causal chain of individuals each intending to use the name the same way. This being the case, Kripke's view would generate the result that current uses of "Madagascar" still refer to a part of continental Africa. This unintuitive result is produced because Kripke's causal picture incorrectly makes the initial baptism a necessary part of speaker's reference. This is evident in Evans' Marco Polo example, where it seems Marco Polo was placed in a context where he believed the name to refer to the island instead of continental Africa. Thus, Evans concludes that the mental state of the speaker must play at least some role in the determination of reference.

Evans' own two theories of naming hybridize elements of Kripke's causal picture as well as the descriptivist theory of naming. In his theory of speaker's reference (Evans 202), a speaker's use of a name N on a particular occasion refers to whatever object is the dominant causal source of the cluster of information which the speaker associates with N. In his theory of a name's reference, for N to be the name of an object Y amongst a community of speakers two conditions must obtain. First, it must be common knowledge among speakers of a community that N is used to refer to Y. Note that Evans' theory of name's reference depends on his theory of speaker's reference; individual speaker's must somehow converge in their use of N to refer to Y before it can become common knowledge amongst a community of speakers that N refers to Y.

⁸ Ibid., 299.

⁹ Evans and Altham, "The Causal Theory of Names."

¹⁰ Ibid., 188.

¹¹ Ibid., 196.

Going back to the Madagascar example, Evans' theory would generate the intuitive result that current uses of "Madagascar" does refer to the island and not the mainland because the island is the dominant causal source of the information we associate with "Madagascar". Thus, Evans has effectively excised the need for initial baptisms. For him, the causal origin of a name does not play a necessary role in reference; an object acquires a name simply by virtue of being the dominant causal source of the information we associate with a name (Evans 195).

Objections to Evans

However, by ridding his theory of initial baptisms, Evans' leaves himself open to two related objections: the qua-problem and the problem of incorrect causal source. In what follows I develop scenarios in which these problems are exposed.

First, consider the qua-problem¹². Suppose that every day a man walks home from work he see a black cat sitting outside his neighbor's house. He names this cat "Trump" and even converses about him to his friends. However, unbeknownst to him, what he thinks is a cat is actually a flower pot. According to Evans' theory, whenever he uses the name "Trump" in conversation, it would seem that he is in fact speaking of a clay flower pot. However, this seems incorrect. Intuitively, it would seem that because the man did not properly grasp what kind of thing he was referring to by "Trump", his use of the name does not refer to anything at all, it is an empty name. Considering this, it would seem that successful reference requires the individual who initiates the use a name to at least have a correct notion of the kind of thing they are referring to.

Second, consider the problem of incorrect causal source. Suppose that there is a talented but reclusive young writer who writes a fictional biography about the life of a famous author whom he calls "J.D. Salinger". Due to his reclusive nature, he never realizes that there really is a famous author by that name. He sends this manuscript to an unethical but prestigious publishing company who subsequently releases it as if it were truly J.D. Salinger's biography. This biography becomes a bestseller, and critics laud it as the definitive biography of J.D. Salinger's life.

Suppose that prior to the publication of this fictional biography, most people knew J.D. Salinger only as "the writer of *The Catcher in the Rye*". Over time, the fictional biography becomes increasingly popular and so becomes the dominant causal source of the public's beliefs about J.D. Salinger. Under Evans' theory it would seem that whenever people use the name "J.D. Salinger" they are really referring to the reclusive young writer himself he would

¹² A similar issue with Evans' theory was first noted by Dickie, "III—How Proper Names Refer," 70.

be the dominant causal source of the name¹³. This seems to be the wrong result. Intuitively, it would seem that even though the dominant causal source of our beliefs about J.D. Salinger is from a fictional biography about a fictional character, our use of “J.D. Salinger” nevertheless refers to the real author. This unintuitive result seems to occur because Evans’ theory has gotten rid of initial dubbings. As such, the referent is no longer linked to a name by individuals who have been in the presence of the object.

Evans appeared to be correct in recognizing that in making initial baptisms an necessary part of reference, the Kripke’s causal theory left itself open to unintuitive results in scenarios of reference change due to error. However, as these two examples suggest, it appears that he was mistaken to believe that initial baptisms have no role to play in reference at all.

III. Hybrid Theories of Names: Devitt

Devitt’s theory agrees with Kripke that a theory of names requires an account of reference-fixing and reference-borrowing. This section provides a brief explanation of relevant parts of Devitt’s theory and explains why it appears to have an advantage over Evans’ theory.

Like Evans’ and Kripke’s theories, what allows for reference is a causal relation between name and referent. Devitt calls this causal relation a d-chain. The d-chain consists of three kinds of links¹⁴:

- 1.) The grounding of a name in an object (reference-fixing),
- 2.) Abilities to refer
- 3.) Reference-borrowing

In reference fixing, a name, N is introduced ostensively¹⁵ at a formal or informal grounding event in the presence of an object Y, which will henceforth become the referent of N. The grounding is perceived by the dubber and other individuals present. Because of their perception of Y at the dubbing event, individuals are causally affected by Y, and in virtue of this, N is causally grounded in Y for them. Thus, they gain a semantic ability: the ability to refer to Y by N which is causally grounded in Y. They are now able to successfully use N to refer to Y because underlying their ability to refer is a causal chain known as a designating-chain (d-chain) linking their ability to refer to the referent¹⁶.

¹³ Evans’ theory does not mention how it deals with empty names like those of fictional characters. However, I venture to suggest that the dominant causal source of our beliefs about a fictional character would be the author. Another possibility is that fictional names are just descriptions that do not refer to anything.

¹⁴ Devitt, *Designation*, 129.

¹⁵ This need not be an overt pointing to of the object, it may simply be an individual’s eye facing the direction of the object.

¹⁶ Devitt and Sterelny, *Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, 55.

The second kind of link, the ability to refer is a mental states that contains a set of thoughts (beliefs, desires, or hopes), which are grounded in the referent and associated with the name¹⁷. In the third kind of link, reference-borrowing, those individuals present at the initial dubbing spread the ability to refer (to Y by N) to others by communication. Speakers exercise their ability to refer by uttering N in a conversation, and hearers gain the ability to refer by hearing N uttered. By hearing N, hearers are causally affected; this grounds the name N in the object Y for the hearer in the same as seeing the object in the initial dubbing grounded the name in the object for those present¹⁸. Now, those who heard N spoken can successfully exercise their abilities to refer because underlying their ability to refer is a d-chain which connects the hearer's new ability back to the speaker's ability and ultimately back to the grounding of N in Y¹⁹.

Advantages of Devitt's Theory

In order to refine the original notion of reference-fixing in order to account for Evans' objection of reference-change due to error, Devitt posits multiple groundings²⁰. This means that occasions relevantly similar to initial dubbings function to ground a name in an object in the same way. An utterance of a name counts as a grounding so long as the speaker directly perceives the object. Thus, under Devitt's interpretation of the Madagascar case, Marco Polo was in fact grounding the name "Madagascar" in the island when he misapprehended the Arab sailors. Therefore, he did not inherit the ability to refer from them, but instead gained a new ability. Over time, the number of groundings of "Madagascar" in the island became the prevailing majority, reinforcing that d-chain and overpowering the use of "Madagascar" to refer to the mainland. Thus the referent of "Madagascar" was changed.

Devitt's theory also deals successfully with the qua-problem. Recall the case of the man who mistook a flowerpot for a cat which he referred to by the name "Trump". To account for problems like this, Devitt²¹ stipulates that the grounder of a name must be both directly perceiving the object as well as thinking of the object under a correct general kind term (cat, flower, car). However, it is important to note this requirement extends only to Devitt's theory of reference-fixing. Individuals engaging in reference-borrowing are not required to have thoughts that must "fit" the referent, unlike in the descriptivists theory²². Thus, Devitt's theory generates what appears to be the correct response in the above scenario: the man's use of "Trump" fails to refer to anything because he incorrectly believed a flowerpot to be a cat.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁸ The name *N* is grounded in the object for the hearers even though they do not directly perceive the object because the underlying d-chain ends in a successful grounding. Thus, they are in a sense indirectly grounded.

¹⁹ Devitt and Sterelny, *Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, 56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²² *Ibid.*, 55.

However, it might be objected that “correctly thought of under a general kind term” is too vague. Although the above scenario is a clear case where there was a failure to conceptualize the referent under the correct term, this is not so clear in others. For instance, consider whether or not a reference fails if what the man thought was a cat was actually a raccoon, a cougar, or a rock. It would seem that, at least in the case of a raccoon or a cougar the man’s use of “Trump” does not fail to refer, although in the case a rock or a flower pot it does seem to fail. At what point does reference fail completely? How specific or vague does the correct general kind term be? These are questions which remain unanswered but acknowledged by Devitt²³. Nevertheless, this does not appear to be a fundamental issue with his theory. Intuitively, there does seem to be some degree of fit required for an initiator of a name to successfully ground a name in an object.

Finally, when faced with the problem of incorrect causal source, which was expressed with the “J.D. Salinger” case, Devitt’s theory also seems to provide an intuitive answer. Under Devitt’s theory, a person’s use of “J.D. Salinger” refers to the real J.D. Salinger even if most of the thoughts that they associated with that name are caused by the reclusive young writer. This is because for a person to be able to successfully refer to J.D. Salinger, the ability to refer must have been linked by d-chain to a grounding of the name in the J.D. Salinger where the grounder directly perceived him and thought of him under the correct general kind term. Intuitively speaking, this seems right. If it were discovered that the dominant source of our beliefs about J.D. Salinger stem from a fictional character with the same name, a person would likely say “I was wrong to think X about J.D. Salinger”, and not conclude that we were referring to a fictional character.

IV. Conclusion

In light of Devitt’s strong commitment to a naturalistic approach in the philosophy of language, it might be expected his theory would diverge significantly from Evans’. This is not the case. Both agree that Kripke went too far in disavowing descriptivist elements. They argue that the thoughts we associated with names have some role to play in reference. However, they also agree with Kripke that names refer by virtue of a causal relation, although they place the causal relation between an object and the thoughts associated with the name. But this is where they diverge. Although Evans correctly identifies that Kripke’s causal picture could not handle reference-change due to error because it made reference rely completely on the initial dubbing, he was wrong to believe that initial baptisms play no role in reference. This leaves his theory open to unintuitive results when faced with the qua-problem and the problem of incorrect causal source.

In contrast, Devitt correctly saw that dubbings were essential, but that there was nothing necessary about the initial dubbing. By allowing for multiple groundings, he avoids the issue of reference-change due to error, without having to remove reference-fixing as an

²³ Ibid., 62.

essential component of his theory of naming. Furthermore, this gives Devitt two advantages over Evans. First, he avoids the problem of incorrect causal source because names can only successfully refer if they are causally grounded in the object by direct perception. Second, he avoids the qua- problem by stipulating that grounders must have a correct belief of the object under a general kind term.

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