

# Mind, Matter, and Language

## Lecture 10: Against Descriptivism

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**This Friday (16:10): “Essay writing”**

<https://writingcentre.ppls.ed.ac.uk/philskills/>

# Millianism and Descriptivism

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# Millianism and Descriptivism

Today's topic: names.

- 'Boris Johnson'
- 'Bob'
- 'Canberra'
- 'Hesperus'
- 'Vulcan'
- '2'

# Millianism and Descriptivism

Two views about names:

1. The meaning of a name is its referent.

**Millianism, Direct Reference Theory**

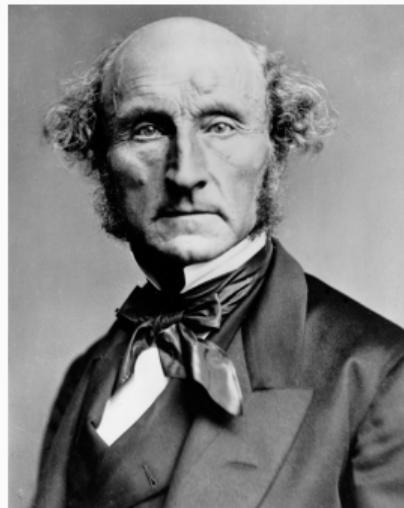
2. Names (also) have a descriptive meaning: a way of identifying their referent.

**The Frege-Russell-Theory, Descriptivism**

## Millianism and Descriptivism

*Proper names [...] don't indicate or imply anything about the attributes of the individuals who bear them. When we name a child 'Paul' or a dog 'Caesar', these names are simply marks enabling us to say things about those individuals. We presumably had some reason for our selection of a name for a given individual, but the name it has been given it is independent of the reason.*

Mill, "A system of logic" (1843)



## Millianism and Descriptivism

*A proper name signifies nothing but the individual whose name it is; and when we apply it to the individual, we neither affirm nor deny anything concerning him.*

Reid, "Essays on the Powers..." (1827)



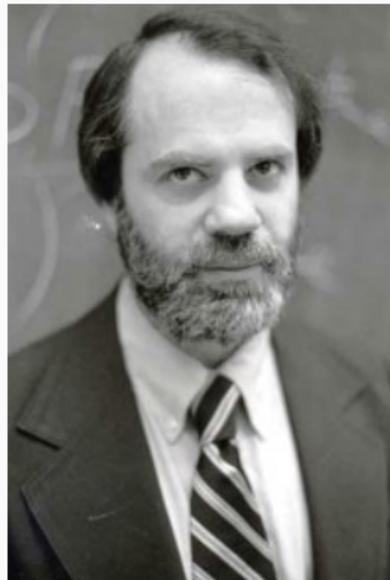
We already know some arguments against direct reference theory.

- Empty names like 'Vulcan' are not meaningless.
- 'Hesperus = Phosphorus' is informative.
- Hammurabi believed that Hesperus is visible in the evening, but not that Phosphorus is visible in the evening.

## Some arguments against descriptivism

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## Some arguments against descriptivism

### Problem 1: Variable descriptions

Different people associate different descriptions with the same name.

Background assumption: A word doesn't have different meanings for different speakers of the same language.

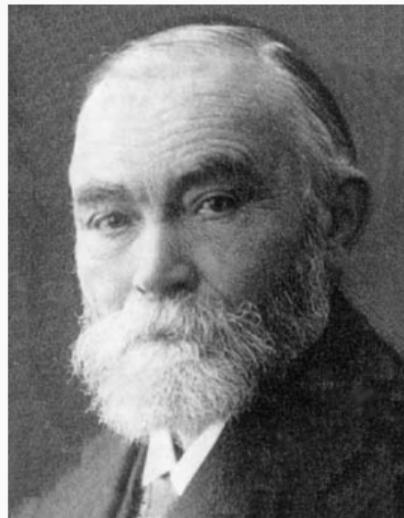
- You: 'Canberra is boring.'
- I: 'No, Canberra isn't boring.'

If 'Canberra' means different things for you and me, I don't deny what you asserted.

## Some arguments against descriptivism

*In the case of an actual proper name such as 'Aristotle' opinions as to the sense may differ. [...] So long as the reference remains the same, such variations of sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science and ought not to occur in a perfect language.*

Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (1892)



### Problem 2: No identifying description

- Many people only know about Richard Feynman that he is a famous physicist.
- They still refer to Feynman when they use the name 'Feynman'.
- But Feynman is not the only famous physicist.
- So we can use a name without having a description that uniquely picks out the referent.

**Response:** If someone uses 'Feynman' to talk about Feynman, they also know that Feynman is called 'Feynman'.

## Some arguments against descriptivism

*In order to discover what is actually in my mind when I judge about Julius Caesar, we must substitute for the proper name a description made up of some of the things I know about him. (A description which will often serve to express my thought is 'the man whose name was Julius Caesar'. For whatever else I may have forgotten about him, it is plain that when I mention him I have not forgotten that that was his name.)*

Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance..." (1910)



## Some arguments against descriptivism

### Problem 3: False descriptions

We can use 'Feynman' to refer to Feynman even if we have false beliefs about Feynman.

Suppose you believe that Feynman invented the hydrogen bomb.

Then the description you associate with 'Feynman' may be 'the famous physicist called 'Feynman' who invented the hydrogen bomb'.

The name does not refer to the unique person satisfying this description.

## Some arguments against descriptivism

Three arguments so far:

1. The problem of variable descriptions
2. The problem of unspecific descriptions
3. The problem of false descriptions

But what are these problems for?

## Some arguments against descriptivism

What is descriptivism?

### Fregean Descriptivism:

- The sense of an expression is a condition for candidate referents.
- If there is a unique thing meeting this condition, the expression refers to that thing.
- Every competent user of an expression grasps its sense.

Fregean Descriptivism does not assume that the sense of 'Feynman' contains arbitrary beliefs a speaker may have about Feynman.

Perhaps the sense of 'Feynman' just is *the physicist called 'Feynman'*.

Not clear if problems 1–3 really affect Fregean Descriptivism.

## Some arguments against descriptivism

What is descriptivism?

### **Russellian Descriptivism:**

“The thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description.”

- Russellian Descriptivism does not assume that the description is the same for every person.
- Russellian Descriptivism does not (obviously) assume that the description determines the name's reference.

Not clear if problems 1–3 really affect Russellian Descriptivism.

## Kripke's "epistemic argument" against descriptivism

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## Kripke's "epistemic argument" against descriptivism

Philosophy jargon:

A sentence is **analytic** if it is true in virtue of its meaning.

A sentence is **synthetic** if it is not analytic.

A hypothesis is **a priori** if its truth-value can be established by pure thought.

A hypothesis is **a posteriori** if it is not a priori.

- Everything that's red is coloured.
- There's a red thing that is coloured.
- There are infinitely many prime numbers.
- Jack the Ripper is a murderer.
- Jack the Ripper either doesn't exist or is a murderer.

## Kripke's "epistemic argument" against descriptivism

### Problem 4: Kripke's "epistemic argument"

Suppose 'Kurt Gödel' means *the man who proved the incompleteness of Peano Arithmetic*.

Then 'Kurt Gödel (either doesn't exist or) proved the incompleteness of Peano Arithmetic' is analytic and a priori.

But it is not.

We could find out that Gödel stole the proof from a man called Schmidt.

If we could find out that  $p$  is false by empirical investigation, then  $p$  is not a priori.

## Problem 4: Kripke's "epistemic argument"

1. For any non-trivial condition  $C$  associated with a name ' $N$ ', we could find out that the name's referent does not satisfy the condition.
2. So ' $N$  is  $C$ ' is not a priori.
3. So ' $N$  is  $C$ ' is not analytic.
4. But if ' $N$ ' means 'the  $C$ ', then ' $N$  is  $C$ ' would be analytic.
5. So names are not equivalent to descriptions.

## Problem 4: Kripke's "epistemic argument"

1. For any non-trivial condition  $C$  associated with a name ' $N$ ', we could find out that the relevant object does not satisfy the condition.
2. So ' $N$  either doesn't exist or is  $C$ ' is not a priori.
3. So ' $N$  either doesn't exist or is  $C$ ' is not analytic.
4. But if ' $N$ ' means 'the  $C$ ', then ' $N$  either doesn't exist or is  $C$ ' would be analytic.
5. So names are not equivalent to descriptions.

## Kripke's "epistemic argument" against descriptivism

Applied to Russellian Descriptivism:

- Suppose Benjamin Franklin is known to you as *the inventor of the lightning rod*.
- The thought you express by 'Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston' is that the inventor of the lightning rod was born in Boston.
- The thought you express by 'Benjamin Franklin was the inventor of the lightning rod' is that the inventor of the lightning rod was the inventor of the lightning rod.
- But when you say 'Benjamin Franklin was the inventor of the lightning rod', you could be wrong. Your judgement is not a priori.

## Kripke's "epistemic argument" against descriptivism

### Possible response:

If it could turn out that  $N$  (exists and) is not  $C$ , then  $C$  is not the condition that gives the meaning/sense of ' $N$ '.

For every name ' $N$ ', there are conditions  $C$  for which it could not turn out that  $N$  exists and is not  $C$ .

- Could it turn out that Richard Feynman was not called Richard Feynman?
- Could it turn out that Richard Feynman was a Japanese fisherman called Urashima Taro of whom no-one outside Japan has ever heard?
- Could it turn out that Aristotle is a suburb of Melbourne?

## An argument against direct reference theory

1. According to direct reference theory, if 'C' expresses a non-trivial condition, then 'N is C' and 'N is not C' are never analytic.
2. So 'N is not C' is not a priori.
3. So for any non-trivial condition C and name 'N', it could turn out that N is C.
4. But for many N and C, it could not turn out that N is C.