

Soames on Kripke¹

Naming & Necessity weaves themes from semantics, epistemology, and metaphysics. Critical reaction has been in a certain way divided. Some philosophers, notably two-dimensionalists like Chalmers and Jackson, think that Kripke has underestimated the connections here. He should have identified metaphysical, epistemic, and semantic possibility, at least considered as features of worlds. Other philosophers, such as Donnellan and Salmon, have the opposite worry: they think that the weaving together becomes at some points a blurring together. Scott Soames's four chapters on Kripke are the latest and most interesting installment in this push-back tradition.²

Soames agrees with Kripke about names' semantic values and how they acquire those values. He agrees with Kripke that there can be contingent apriori truths and necessary aposteriori truths – henceforth, “mixed” truths. But these are separate issues for Soames. Names do of course figure in the examples Kripke offers; but just for that reason, the examples give a misleading impression of what is going on. Sometimes the problem is that

(1) the example works, but not thanks to the names; insofar as it contains names, one can find a name-less variant.

Other times it's that

(2) because of the names, the example does not work; one must find a name-less variant.

An example of type (1) for aposteriori necessity is Saul Kripke (if he exists) is a human being. This would remain aposteriori necessary if Saul Kripke were replaced by, say, a rigid description of Kripke. An example of type (2) for aposteriori necessity is Hesperus = Phosphorus. Soames considers this apriori; but it becomes aposteriori if we replace Hesperus and Phosphorus with suitable rigidified descriptions. A possible example of type (1) for the contingent apriori is Hot things feel different from cold ones. This could be (meaning, I don't know it not to be³) contingent apriori, but hot and cold are not names. An example of type (2) for the contingent apriori is Stick s is of length one meter. This is contingent aposteriori in Soames's view, but it becomes contingent apriori if one meter is replaced by the actual length of stick s.

¹ I got VERY helpful advice from Alex Byrne and David Chalmers.

² I will focus on the first three, ignoring the fourth.

³ Soames doesn't discuss this sort of case to my knowledge; it lacks (is meant to lack) the de re element that is his usual basis for denying apriority.

The simplest route to mixed truths starts with reference-fixing. Kripke of course thinks that names (with their references suitably fixed) *do* provide a distinctive route to mixed truths. Why does Soames reject this? He starts by noting that there are several things “What fixes the reference of name n?” can mean – several things it does mean over the course of Naming and Necessity. One could be after a

rule that speakers master when they learn a name....[a rule] which is implicitly grasped by speakers, and which could be used by them in specifying the truth conditions of sentences containing the name (Soames 2003)(Soames 2003, 369)

This, what Soames calls the semantic question, is tied to the reference-fixing version of the description theory. “What fixes the reference of name n?” then becomes the question of

(i) how a name... initially came to have the meaning and/or reference it does and (ii) in virtue of what aspects of its use....it retains that meaning and reference (369-370).

This is called the foundational question. There is thirdly a pragmatic question: what determines “which of its various contents a term is used with on a particular occasion” (369)? (A fourth question, not discussed by Soames, will be important later.) Kripke’s doctrine of mixed truths is said to build on his answer to (part (i) of) the foundational question.

Here is a perhaps oversimple way of stating Kripke’s position. Suppose one stipulates that name n is to refer to the ϕ , where the ϕ , it turns out, is ϕ . Then any evidence one possesses for S[the ϕ] is also evidence for S[n], and any evidence for the former must first have been evidence for the latter. It seems, then, that S[n] takes over its evidential base, and so presumably its epistemic status, from S[the ϕ]. But S[n] has its modal status autonomously. S[n] will be mixed when its modal status fails to line up with S[the ϕ]’s status as apriori or aposteriori.

Here is a perhaps oversimple statement of why the above is not in Soames’s view convincing: the truth that sentence S expresses is getting mixed up with the truth that sentence S expresses a truth. Most of Soames’s objections trade on this idea. He objects to Kripke’s conclusions that, taken as directed at the truths expressed, they are just incorrect. The truth expressed by Hesperus = Phosphorus, being of the form $\phi = \phi$, is apriori; the truth expressed by Stick s, if it exists, is of length 1 m is of the form ϕ is of length l , which looks clearly aposteriori. He objects to Kripke’s arguments that they underestimate the gap between knowing that a sentence is true and knowing

the truth expressed, and the (disquotational) principles needed to bridge that gap are problematic.

Soames doesn't say why he thinks Kripke had to show that Hesperus's identity with Phosphorus was aposteriori; who would ever have doubted it? But Soames imputes an argument which he then finds fault with. He thinks Kripke is too impressed by the fact that

we could have evidence qualitatively indistinguishable from the evidence we [do] have and determine the reference of the two names by the positions of the two planets in the sky, without the planets being the same (Kripke 1980). (Kripke 1980, 104)

This shows only that the sentence Hesperus = Phosphorus could (without our noticing) express a false proposition, not that that the proposition it does express could be false. To reach the second conclusion from the first, Kripke will need principles of STRONG DISQUOTATION (SDQ),

An individual i who understands \underline{S} is disposed to accept \underline{S} ...iff i believes the proposition semantically expressed by \underline{S} (384, simplified)

and STRONG DISQUOTATION AND JUSTIFICATION (SDJ),

An individual i who understands \underline{S} and possesses evidence e would be justified in accepting \underline{S} ...on the basis of e iff i 's possession of e is sufficient to ensure that i would be justified in believing the proposition semantically expressed by \underline{S} (385, simplified)

And these principles are untrue; they leave no room for the possibility of justifiably different attitudes towards sentences that (unbeknownst to the agent) express the same proposition. So Kripke's case for necessary truths not knowable apriori is (Soames thinks) thoroughly resistable.

The case for contingent apriori truths fare no better. Soames agrees that our understanding of Stick s is a meter long guarantees us that it expresses a truth. But to parlay that metalinguistic assurance into understanding-based knowledge that stick s is a meter long requires principles of WEAK DISQUOTATION (WDQ) and WEAK DISQUOTATION AND JUSTIFICATION (WDJ) -- the left-to-right direction of SDQ and SDJ. A still further principle is needed to convert understanding-based knowledge into apriori knowledge, viz. WEAK LINGUISTICISM ABOUT THE APRIORI (WLA):

If one knows a proposition p solely by virtue of understanding a sentence that expresses p , and knowing semantic facts about it, then one knows p apriori (407).

Soames rejects these principles, too. WDQ raises the specter of de re beliefs about objects that we are not acquainted with and know nothing about. WDJ lets us boot true such beliefs up into de re knowledge “from the armchair,” just by a linguistic performance. WLA makes the resulting knowledge apriori. The combination threatens to make all of an object’s properties apriori knowable, even by someone who by ordinary standards is entirely uninformed.

I was going to say that I could only speculate on Kripke’s response to all this. But the truth is that I can’t even do that. The objections are launched from territory that Kripke never lays claim to, and seems reluctant even to visit. This might seem to help Kripke – for which is likelier, that his arguments fail for reasons that emerge only when they are reformulated in terms he avoids, or that the reformulated arguments are not really his? But in another way, his silence hurts Kripke, by leaving his defenders with little to go on. Our only real option is to poke about in his writings for ideas that might be assembled into a response, without suggesting for a moment that it is a response Kripke would like.

One oddity of Soames’s discussion of apriority is the way it shifts the focus from particular alleged instances of apriori knowledge to apriori knowability as such: self-identities are always apriori knowable, the length of a material object is necessarily a matter for empirical investigation. Kripke tries early on to distance himself from this sort of judgment. One may start out wondering whether “it’s possible...to know [S] independently of any experience” (35). But this is soon seen to be hopelessly imprecise:

possible for whom? For God? For the Martians? Or just for people with minds like ours? To make this all clear might [involve] a host of problems all its own... It might be best therefore, instead of using the phrase ‘a priori truth’... to stick to the question of whether a particular person or knower knows something a priori or believes it true on the basis of a priori evidence (35).

I sense a Moorean element in Kripke’s position here. He is more confident of his judgments about particular cases than in sweeping claims about the kind of thing that can be known apriori in principle. This Moorean Kripke need not disagree with Soames’s claim that it is apriori knowable that Hesperus is Phosphorus, as long as it’s clear that “our” knowledge that Hesperus is Phosphorus is aposteriori. There is a disagreement when Soames denies the possibility of knowing apriori that stick s has a certain length; but our Moorean

Kripke is not about to let high semantic theory — in particular, the idea that apriori knowledge attributions report a relation to singular propositions — overrule his intuitive judgment that the stipulator knows apriori.

Now, Soames does not merely maintain that someone can know apriori that Hesperus = Phosphorus; he thinks that we ourselves do know apriori that Hesperus = Phosphorus, by virtue of knowing apriori that Hesperus = Hesperus. The proof of this relies, however, on “a modest theoretical framework that goes beyond what Kripke explicitly commits himself to in Naming & Necessity” (373). And this framework includes the high-theory principle that statements of the form

x ...knows apriori/knows aposteriori that S report that an agent ...knows apriori, or knows aposteriori, the proposition designated by *that S*. (373)

Granting Soames that Hesperus = Phosphorus and Hesperus = Hesperus express the same proposition, this principle rules out any possibility of knowing apriori that Hesperus = Hesperus but not that Hesperus = Phosphorus. A framework that denies Kripke some of his principal claims cannot easily be considered a modest extension of Kripke.

Soames might say that there is more than high theory behind his denial of apriori knowledge in the meter case. He distinguishes two ways the ceremony might go. Scenario 1 has us introducing one meter to stand for the length of a stick in full view before us, a stick whose length we can see (back to this in a moment). Scenario 2, the “blind” reference-fixing scenario, has us

attempting to introduce the term one meter as a rigid designator of whatever satisfies the description the length of stick s at t in a situation in which we have never seen stick s, and have no idea how long it is. (404)

He sees four problems with the notion that blind reference-fixing could gain us apriori knowledge that stick s is a meter long.⁴ (i) Given that we don't know what length is being attributed, it is not clear we even understand the sentence The length of stick s is one meter; for understanding is knowing the meaning, and the meaning is the proposition that s is of that (unknown) length. (ii) It is puzzling how one could acquire knowledge of a thing's length just by the stroke of a pen (411). (iii) The trick gives us knowledge we don't intuitively have:

⁴ At least.

Wait until students taking exams hear about this. When asked, Who did such and such?, they may answer N did such and such, where 'N' is a name I hereby stipulate has its reference rigidly fixed by the description 'the individual who did such and such'. Such a performance would be absurd. (411)

(iv) The trick gives us apriori knowledge that we don't intuitively have. For suppose that object o has property P, and that Q is a conjunction of other properties that combine with P to specify o uniquely; and suppose we stipulate that n is to refer to whatever has P and Q. Then by the assumptions of scenario 2, we know apriori that n is P, which is to say that we know apriori of object o that it has the property in question; given how little was assumed about o and P, "virtually every proposition that predicates one or more properties of any object would qualify as capable of being known apriori" (410).

Some of these untoward results might seem blameable on principles of Soames's expository framework (373), notably relationalism – to know (know apriori,...) that S is to know (know apriori, ...) the associated singular proposition – and exportation – to know (know apriori, ...) the proposition n is F is to know (know apriori,...) of a certain object o that it is F. Soames blames the bad results on blind reference-fixing. It "creates too large of a gap between the proposition expressed by a sentence...and the information with which competent speakers are presented when they understand the sentence" to count as a legitimate way of introducing names (415). Sentences one can understand and assent to without being in any position to entertain or believe the associated proposition must be considered "seriously defective, and perhaps not fully meaningful" (415).

But scenario 1 is in any case the one Kripke seems to have had in mind. Here "we start out with a perceptually justified true belief, of a certain length l, that it is the length of stick s at t" (416). Our awareness of the stick's length means that this time the reference-fixing is not blind, and we do understand The length of stick s is 1 m. Soames grants this understanding is all we need to know the proposition expressed. WLA would call the knowledge apriori, but WLA is wrong, because the perceptual belief mentioned above not only acquaints us with the expressed proposition, it also justifies our belief in that proposition. Soames concludes that neither scenario delivers on Kripke's promise of apriori knowledge that stick s is a meter long.

Now, given that Kripke never explains the principle that is supposed to deliver apriori knowledge in the meter case, one can hardly blame Soames for suggesting a principle sufficient to the task. Even so, it is hard to see WLA as playing much of a role in Kripke's thinking. Kripke hardly mentions propositions,

or knowing them apriori; his topic is apriori knowledge that S , where \underline{S} stands in for a sentence of English. Of course, Soames's relationalism obliterates the distinction between that and apriori knowledge of the associated proposition. But it can hardly give WLA a role in Kripke's thinking that a principle of Soames's makes it no longer off topic. It might be thought that Kripke needs propositions to answer the charge that he is confusing metalinguistic knowledge with knowledge of the non-linguistic world. But that is just a confusion. Knowing that S , e.g., that Hesperus is far away, is already knowing about the non-linguistic world, in a way that is beyond undoing by maneuvers with propositions

What if we try to meet Soames half way? Let's suppose that Kripke did accept propositions, of which some were knowable apriori and others not. This propositional distinction could not have been directly relevant to his stated conclusions, for these conclusions are of the form x knows apriori (aposteriori) that \underline{S} , and Kripke thinks that one can know apriori that S_1 while knowing only aposteriori that S_2 , even when \underline{S}_1 and \underline{S}_2 express the same proposition, to the extent they are in the proposition-expressing business at all.⁵ (I am taking Soames's word for it that Kripke would not want to associate Hesperus is Phosphorus and Hesperus is Hesperus with different propositions.⁶) This is a third reason to doubt that WLA played much of a role in Kripke's thinking.

Soames might say that Kripke's actual thinking is beside the point; he needs WLA to justify his claim that one can know apriori that stick s is a meter long. I grant that he needs it, if his argument takes the form Soames suggests. Soames has Kripke starting from the premise that our understanding of Stick s is a meter long assures us that it expresses a truth, then moving by disquotation to understanding-based knowledge of the truth expressed; WLA is called in finally to convert understanding-based knowledge to apriori knowledge.

But this way of running Kripke's argument ignores the connection between understanding a sentence and knowing its meaning, that is, the proposition it expresses. Kripke has us coming to understand \underline{S} (in part) by learning that it expresses a true proposition. But if we learn which proposition \underline{S} expresses and that the proposition is true in one fell swoop, then we come know of the proposition in question that it is true, just by virtue of acquiring an understanding of \underline{S} . If my understanding of \underline{S} assures me that what it expresses is true – assures me of what it expresses that it is true – then that would seem to give me a kind of apriori knowledge that S . The principle being invoked here is REGULAR OLD LINGUISTICISM ABOUT THE APRIORI (RLA):

⁵ As Kripke says in "A Puzzle About Belief," "Naming and Necessity never asserted a substitutivity principle for epistemic contexts..." (Salmon and Soames 1988, 146).

⁶ I am basically just running one of Soames's objections in reverse.

If i 's understanding of \underline{S} , = i 's knowledge of \underline{S} 's meaning, = i 's knowledge of which proposition p it is that \underline{S} expresses, provides i with a guarantee that p is true, then i knows apriori that S .

RLA resembles WLA in offering only a sufficient condition for apriori knowledge. But where WLA does not itself give us apriori knowledge that stick s is of length one meter (one needs the two discredited disquotational principles too), RLA seems to suffice all by itself, provided anyway that the reference-fixing ceremony is conceded to confer understanding.

RLA also goes a long way toward exonerating Kripke's examples of aposteriori necessity. Soames thinks we know apriori that Hesperus is Phosphorus, by virtue of knowing apriori that Hesperus = Hesperus. RLA agrees with this if, but only if, our understanding of Hesperus is Phosphorus – our knowledge of which proposition p it is that the sentence expresses – provides us with a guarantee that p is true. Whether it provides this guarantee or not is the question we turn to now.

I know the meaning of Hesperus is Phosphorus by knowing the meanings (referents) of Hesperus and Phosphorus, and knowing that p is the proposition that identifies the one with the other. In what does my knowledge of the referents consist? Do not be misled by the fact that the referent of 'Hesperus' and the referent of 'Phosphorus', construed as referring phrases, refer to the same thing. They are no more referring phrases than Hesperus's color is a referring phrase in I know Hesperus's color. The referent of 'Hesperus' and the color of Hesperus are what linguists call concealed questions; they function in much the same way as the unconcealed (indirect) questions what 'Hesperus' refers to and what color Hesperus is, namely to enable some sort of commentary on answers to the corresponding direct question, What does 'Hesperus' refer to? and What color is Hesperus?. If knowing Hesperus's color = knowing what color Hesperus is = knowing how to answer What color is Hesperus?, then knowing Hesperus's referent = knowing what Hesperus refers to = knowing the answer to What does 'Hesperus' stand for?⁷

Recall that RLA grants us apriori knowledge that Hesperus = Phosphorus only if a certain condition is met: one doesn't count as knowing how to answer what does 'Hesperus' stand for? and what does Phosphorus stand for? – we're talking about the knowledge whereby one understands these terms – unless one knows that Hesperus and Phosphorus stand for the same thing. We have

⁷ If someone thinks knowing what *Hesperus* refers to = knowing what *Phosphorus* refers to, I reply: Wait until students taking exams hear about this!

Soames's own word for it that this condition does not obtain.⁸ Users of the names may be aware, of course, that the terms co-refer. But this is normally collateral knowledge, external to their understanding.

Some would take a stronger view: it must be collateral knowledge, that is, the knowledge that both terms stand for the same thing must not figure in the knowledge whereby one understands the terms. Kripke gives an example that bears on the stronger view in "A Puzzle about Belief" (Kripke 1988):

The main issue seems to me here to be – how essential is particular mode of fixing the reference to a correct learning of the name? If a parent, aware of the familiar identity, takes a child into the fields in the morning and says (pointing to the morning star), "That is called 'Hesperus', has the parent mistaught the language?" (146).

I imagine that Kripke would be even more concerned about the child's education if we suppose, as he allows us to do, that Phosphorus is introduced as simply a second (unaccountably different) word for the evening star. If that is right, then far from thinking that the child's knowledge of what Hesperus and Phosphorus stand for – the knowledge whereby she understands the terms -- must include that Hesperus and Phosphorus co-refer, Kripke is not sure that the knowledge whereby she understands can include their co-reference.⁹ RLA grants us apriori knowledge of Hesperus's identity with Phosphorus only if our understanding of Hesperus and Phosphorus takes a form that it doesn't take, needn't take, and arguably shouldn't take.

Now let's return to Kripke's claim that a suitably situated person can know apriori that stick s is a meter long. Take first scenario 2, the blind reference-fixing scenario. Soames questions whether we acquire an understanding of meter, and although I do not myself question it, let's not argue the point here. What I do think is that questioning it is the only way to stop RLA from granting us apriori knowledge that stick s is a meter long. For suppose that

(1) All we know about the proposition p expressed by The length of stick s is one meter is that

(*) p attributes to stick s a certain length, viz. the length of that very stick.

⁸ It is possible "to understand [Hesperus is Hesperus and Hesperus is Phosphorus], and yet not know that they mean the same thing" (390).

⁹ I tend to think that it can. Philosophy students often learn the words this way, and they understand.

Then

(2) (*) is the only knowledge that could possibly constitute our understanding of The length of stick s is one meter.

But

(3) (*) guarantees that p is true.

So

(4) To the extent we understand the sentence at all, it is by knowing a fact about p that guarantees us that p is true.

It is important to note that premise (1) goes false the minute we see the stick, for seeing it tells us more about the proposition expressed, viz. that it attributes that length to stick s. That we now know two things about the proposition means it is no longer inevitable that (*) should figure in the knowledge whereby we understand; it consequently becomes open to question whether the knowledge whereby we understand enables us to see that the expressed proposition is true. This bears on at least one of Soames's reasons for denying us understanding in this sort of case: "the class of propositions characterized as knowable apriori becomes far too expansive to be theoretically interesting" (410). Soames's worry is greatly mitigated if we focus on (not the apriori knowability of propositions but) a given individual's knowing apriori at such and such a time that S. The class of individuals i, times t, and sentences S such that i knows apriori at t that S is not too expansive to be interesting, if the apriority of i's knowledge is called into doubt the minute i gets an independent line of sight on the proposition expressed.

This brings us back to scenario 1, in which the stick is visible all along. It is indeed puzzling how an initially empirical belief that s is of length l can be made apriori just by a linguistic ceremony. But Kripke never claims that this happens. Our knowledge that S_1 – that stick s is that long — is throughout aposteriori, because the fix on p whereby we understand S_1 doesn't guarantee us that p is true. What the ceremony gives us is apriori knowledge not that S_1 but that S_2 : stick s is a meter long. The knowledge is apriori (says RLA) because we understand S_2 in part by knowing (*), and a proposition with the features attributed by (*) is bound to be true. Now, the proposition p that (*) speaks of also attributes that length to stick s, and we know this. But while this knowledge will very quickly become a large part of our understanding of S_2 ,

perhaps dislodging the knowledge that guarantees p's truth,¹⁰ there is (so Kripke could argue) a brief shining moment when our understanding of S_2 crucially involves that it expresses a proposition attributing a certain stick's length to that very stick, and for that moment, we know apriori that stick s is one meter long.

Why care about any of this? Baptismal ceremonies of the sort Kripke envisages are highly uncommon, and the apriori knowledge they enable is precarious. This wouldn't matter if Kripke were making a purely theoretical point, about the disentangleability in principle of epistemic and metaphysical modality. But he soon moves on to less artificial cases. He thinks with everyday terms too we can distinguish

between the a priori but perhaps contingent properties carried with a term, given by the way its reference was fixed, and the analytic...properties a term may carry, given by its meaning (135)

A certain definition of gold – “the substance instantiated by the items over there, or at any rate, by almost all of them” – though perhaps not necessary does

express an a priori truth, in the same sense (and with the same qualifications applied as) ‘1 meter = length of s’ (135).

The identity Heat = that which is sensed by sensation S

fixes a reference: it therefore is a priori, but not necessary, since heat might have existed, though we did not (136).¹¹

Recall that Kripke's route to the apriori as conceived by Soames starts with “foundational” reference-fixers: roughly, properties of an expression's referent by which it acquires (or retains) that status. But the referents of naturally arising terms like heat and yellow do not acquire that status by satisfying a description. Kripke knows this:

¹⁰ Compare Davies & Humberstone's suggestion in Davies, M. and L. Humberstone (1980). "Two Notions of Necessity." Philosophical Studies 38: 1-30. that it will be hard for 'Julius' to remain a descriptive name if we are introduced to him at a party.

¹¹ “We identified water originally by its characteristic feel, appearance, and perhaps taste....” (128). “[We] identify light by the characteristic visual impressions it produces in us, this seems to be a good example of fixing a reference” (130). “[T]he reference of ‘yellowness’ is fixed by the description ‘that (manifest) property of objects which causes them, under normal circumstances, to be seen as yellow’ (140).

I recognize that there need not always be an identifiable initial baptism... I also think....that such complications will not radically alter the picture (162).

How not? If it was RLA that led Kripke to say we knew apriori that a thing had thus and such features, one would expect him to find him also saying that ignorance of those features prevented a proper understanding of our usual term for that thing. This is what we do find, I think.

Usually, ... the way the reference of the name is fixed is of little importance to us.... [But it] seems overwhelmingly important to us in the case of sensed phenomena (139)

if someone else detects heat by some sort of instrument, but is unable to feel it, we might want to say... that the concept of heat is not the same even though the referent is the same (131)

a blind man who uses the term 'light' ... seems to us to have lost a great deal, perhaps enough for us to declare that he has a different concept....(139).

The larger picture here might be this. With some words there is a legitimate presumption that others identify the referent somewhat as we do (perhaps one line of sight on it is the most widely available or the easiest to adopt). A widely shared presumption is one we might come to rely on in conversation. A presumption we rely on is one we might try to enforce, for instance by charging parents with "misteaching the language" when they explain Phosphorus as just another name for Hesperus. Of course, there are bound to be those whom our efforts can't or don't reach. To them we apply a special warning label — "lacks the (alternatively: our) concept," "doesn't properly understand" — even though, as Kripke says, "the referent is the same." Those who hope for a still strictly Millian picture that allows Kripke his seeming lapses of ideological purity shouldn't give up hope yet.

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