

Kripke on Identity Statements

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Dedicated to the memory of my brother Leon

Abstract: We show that Kripke's argument for the necessity of identity statements relating objects a and b by their rigid designators demands an additional significant premise.

Keywords: identity statements, necessary truth, possible world, rigid designator, Saul Kripke.

In his groundbreaking work on identity, Kripke (1971, 1980) argues that statements of identity relating objects a and b by their rigid designators,¹ if true, are necessarily true. But this is true only if a and b are necessarily what they are. That is, only if we add a premise, an instance of the proposition that:

(I) Everything is necessarily what it is.

A rigid designator, in Kripke's words, "is a term that designates the same object in all possible worlds." (1971, 145) And thus, if the terms 'water' and 'H₂O' are rigid designators and water is identical to H₂O, then 'water=H₂O' is necessarily true. For 'water' and 'H₂O' tag the same objects in every possible world in which they exist.

But this is true only if a relevant instance of (I) is true. That is, only if the object tagged 'water' in the actual world remains water in every possible world in which the tagged object exists. Otherwise, there would be a possible world in which the object tagged 'water' would not be identical to H₂O, and the statement 'water=H₂O' would then not be necessarily true.

Kripke writes:

If 'a' and 'b' are rigid designators, it follows that 'a=b', if true, is anecessary truth.
(1980, 3)

We should add, but only if neither a nor b could have been different from what they are.²

References

- Kripke, Saul. 1971. "Identity and Necessity." In *Identity and Individuation*, edited by Milton K. Munitz, 135-164. New York: New York University Press.
———. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹ More on rigid designators below.

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