On Presenting Objects in Propositions

Paul Dekker

October 1, 2024

Abstract

This paper argues that some well-known passages in the literature do not succeed in non-circularly demonstrating the presence of individuals in propositions and a consequent necessity of identities.

Keywords: Singular proposition; Necessity of identity; Rigid designation.

There appears to be a rather wide consensus in the analytic philosophy of language and mind that certain singular terms refer to independently existing individual objects, directly or rigidly, as it is said, and that these objects may figure as constituents of meanings and of the objects of thought. This idea certainly has a strong intuitive appeal, but it is also hard to prove true. One can argue that *purely logical reasoning* cannot by itself serve to establish that singular terms refer to some real object.[1] But it is also hard to see how there can be any *empirical evidence* that propositions are inhabited by real objects.[2]

The idea has, of course, nevertheless been sustained in the literature, and in this note I want to critically examine two sources that are considered to be doing so. In the first section I inspect a passage from (Kripke 1981) that, upon reflection, must be taken to express a belief in rigid designation rather than ground it. In the second section I find a similar kind of self-motivating circularity in two passages from (Kaplan 1989). The reader should note that I have no ambition to argue for or against a realist picture of meaning of the kind indicated. I am only interested in the force of some kind of motivation that has been supplied in the literature, and that has the air of being compelling.

---

[1] E.g., Bertrand Russell: "There does not even seem any logical necessity why there should be even one individual (...)", adding in a footnote "The primitive propositions in *Principia Mathematica* are such as to allow the inference that at least one individual exists. But I now view this as A DEFECT IN LOGICAL PURITY. (Russell 1919, p. 203; *my capitals*)

[2] E.g., Gottlob Frege: "I cannot put a thought in the hands of my readers with the request that they should examine it from all sides. Something in itself not perceptible by sense, the thought, is presented to the reader — and I must be content with that — wrapped up in a perceptible linguistic form." ["Ich muß mich begnügen, den an sich unsinnlichen Gedanken in die sinnliche sprachliche Form gehüllt dem Leser darzubieten."] (Frege 1984, fn. 6; fn. 4 in the original)

1 Stipulated Necessities

Saul Kripke has famously argued that there is no problem with identifying a certain object, like Richard Nixon, in the (non-actual) possibilities that our modal talk ranges over, because, he says, it is *stipulated* that we talk about that object in those possibilities.[3] The presence of Nixon in a possibility thus is, according to Kripke, the intended result of a stipulation, of some intentional act. It is not a fact, independently observed, or otherwise discovered. Such acts may, of course, also not be made, and they may fail to be successful. They may be acts we may and may not accept. Despite appearances, the issue is not uncontroversial.

Surely there is no consensus, not among logicians, and not among philosophers, about the question what possibilities are. Some, e.g., David Lewis, may argue that the Kripkean stipulations are impossible, if taken literally, because possibilities are total universes, as Lewis may want to maintain, and individual objects are metaphysically bound by the borders of the worlds in which they live. We can therefore at best speak, literally, of counterparts of real individuals in non-actual possibilities and these cannot be numerically identical with the objects they are a counterpart of. (Lewis 1968) The Kripkean stipulation also fits badly in a possible worlds framework like that of Jaakko Hintikka. (Hintikka 1969)

Kripke's point appears to have been backed up by means of his, also famous, principle of the *necessity of identities*. It is obvious that if two terms are *rigid designators*—i.e., if each one of them has the same value in all possibilities—, and if the actual values of the two terms are identical, then the values of the two terms are identical in all possibilities, so that the actual identity of the values of the terms is a necessary identity. The necessity of identities might in turn perhaps constitute motivation for modeling the identified terms as rigid designators. I will not, however, argue for or against that point here. My concern in this section is with the independent motivation of the principle of the necessity of identities itself. The necessity of such identities (and non-identities) is claimed to be close to "self-evident" and "clear enough", intuitively. The intuitive clarification that Kripke presents, however, appears to beg the question, or so I argue here.

Let us consider Kripke's own clarification of the principle in the context in which he himself presents it.

---

[3] "There is no reason why we cannot *stipulate* that, in talking about what would have happened to Nixon in a certain counterfactual situation, we are talking about what would have happened to *him*." (Kripke 1981, p. 44, see also p. 21 and 49)

Already when I worked on modal logic it had seemed to me (...) that the Leibnitzian principle of the indiscernibility of identicals was as self-evident as the law of contradiction. That some philosophers could have doubted it always seemed to me bizarre. The model theoretic study of modal logic ('possible worlds' semantics) could only confirm this conviction (...). The model theory made this completely clear, though it should have been clear enough on the intuitive level. Waiving fussy considerations deriving from the fact that x need not have necessary existence, it was clear from $(x) \square (x = x)$ and Leibnitz's law that identity is an 'internal' relation: $(x) (y) (x = y \supset \square x = y)$. (What pairs (x, y) could be counterexamples? Not pairs of distinct objects, for then the antecedent is false; nor any pair of an object and itself: for then the consequent is true.) (Kripke 1981, p. 3)

My concern is with the question in brackets which the above quote ends with. I understand it as a rhetorical question that is meant to establish that there is no counterexample to the principle, so that it cannot fail to be true.

I am not, here, concerned with the question whether '$x = y$', if true, is a necessary truth. I am concerned with the validity, or tenability, of the argument. The argument, and, with it, my concern, hinges on to the equivocation of (i) x, or the value of 'x', when this variable occurs in the antecedent of the above formula, with (ii) x, or the value of 'x', when it occurs in the consequent. Most naturally the first value will be some object d, that is required to be also the value of 'y' according to the antecedent clause. The same variable 'x' recurs in the consequent under the modal operator '$\square$', here used to claim that, in any arbitrary, accessible, possibility, x also equals y. This claim is then supposed to be verified by, among others, the fact that x, or the value of 'x', then also is this individual d, in any relevant possibility. (And likewise for 'y', but, as said, we don't care about 'y' here.) But why would that be the case? If x is indeed actually this individual d, why would it have to be d in a non-actual possibility?

This conclusion can be enforced if, and only if, we assume that if x is *actually* this individual d, then x is d in *all possibilities*. This seems to be the only way to fill the gap in the reasoning. We need to make this assumption, and for the sake of generality it must moreover be supposed to hold for any arbitrary individual x and object d. So, the one and only way to secure and validate the above argument is by assuming that, in formal terms, $\forall x \forall d (x = d \rightarrow \square x = d)$. Interestingly, precisely this premise, needed to render the argument complete, is the very same claim, formally, that the argument sets out to clarify. Motivation for this claim thus rests on a premise that equals the claim itself, and does not succeed in rendering it independently true.

Let us try and consider the argument from a somewhat more general perspective. We are concerned with the subformula '$\square x = y$', which contains an occurrence of the variable 'x', a variable that has previously received some value in the actual

world and that is now employed in the scope of a modal operator. Let us assume that we have again d as the value of 'x' in actual reality—let us say it is Richard Nixon—, and that it makes the antecedent of the implication true. To determine the truth value of the consequent of the implication, we must evaluate the truth value of '$x = y$', in any arbitrary, accessible, possibility. But what do we know about 'x', or the value of 'x' there?

Note that we are not, now, talking about Nixon in various alternative *circumstances*, circumstances which are real, and in which Nixon himself is obviously assumed to be present. We are here talking about someone, who is actually Nixon, in *non-actual possibilities*, possibilities which are arguably not real, or at least, by assumption, not actual. Surely there is no consensus, neither in logic, nor in philosophy, about what non-actual possibilities really are, besides, perhaps, that they are not real.[4] It therefore appears to be legitimate, and actually appropriate, to raise the question what we know, or are at all able to know, about somebody in a non-actual possibility, who is Nixon in actual reality. If we refrain from metaphysical dogma and stipulation, it seems to be fair to say that we actually know nothing about such individual, besides that it is, by assumption someone, or something, in a non-actual possibility, who is actually Nixon, and that conforms to the laws that all individuals necessarily conform to, more particularly, to logical laws like that of being self-identical.

All this is to say that if there is anything else that we want to be taken to know about him, this must be taken to follow from additional metaphysical stipulations and assumptions that we apparently take for granted. It is only by means of further assumptions or stipulations that we can affirm, e.g., that someone in a possibility who is actually Nixon, is also Nixon there, and that he is distinct, there, from an individual that he is actually distinct from, etc. It seems to me it would be logically 'pure' to not count such additional 'facts' as logical truths, but as what they apparently are: logical consequences of additional metaphysical, non-logical, stipulations and assumptions.

So, again, and we are now about to repeat the above argument, consider a possibility with somebody present who is actually Nixon. About him we know *only* what we know that he necessarily must be. If an individual in a possibility exists, it is necessarily identical to the individual that it is, and necessarily distinct from an individual that it isn't. But an individual is not necessarily something that it actually is, neither is it necessarily distinct from something that it actually is not. Such non-logical metaphysical conclusions must be in need of like, metaphysical, assumptions.[5]

---

[4]Kripke, too, objects to a too realist conception of possibilities: "The term 'possible world' may also mislead; perhaps it suggests the 'foreign country' picture." (Kripke 1981, fn. 15, p. 48) "[A] possible world isn't a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope. " (Kripke 1981, p. 44)

[5]Observe that this is not a non-logical idea. The logical consistency of it can be seen to be demonstrated by the formal frameworks of Hintikka and Lewis, where the above assumptions

Kripke must have been aware of an hidden assumption in the argument above, because immediately below it he concludes with the following qualification:

> If 'a' and 'b' are rigid designators, it follows that 'a = b', if true, is a necessary truth. If 'a' and 'b' are not rigid designators, no such conclusion follows about the statement 'a = b' (...). (Kripke 1981, p. 3)

Apparently, Kripke reads his principle as saying that, for any x and y, if they are identical —and 'x' and 'y' are here used as rigid designators— then x and y are necessarily identical. It is not quite obvious how to formalize this principle, because the, parenthetic, assumption about 'x' and 'y' is "metalinguistic".[6] We may, however, get sufficiently close to such a formalization if we employ an obvious logical consequence of the rigid use of 'x' and 'y'. Such a logical consequence can be used as a condition that has to be minimally satisfied in order for the terms, or their uses, to be rigidly denoting. The most obvious candidate for such a condition is, of course, the condition that if the terms are taken to actually refer to one and the same object, then they necessarily do so. But surely there is hardly any point in arguing for the principle that if x and y are actually identical—and their actual identity implies a necessary one—, then x and y are necessarily identical. This is just an obvious (propositional) logical truth, which needs no independent motivation.

Summing up, we may conclude that a necessity of identities can be stipulated, and that we also can intend certain terms to be rigidly denoting, but we must accept that we are also free to not do so. That actual identities are necessary, and that terms are rigidly denoting, is neither an obvious logical truth, nor an empirical fact, for that matter. More importantly, what may look like an argument that seems to make it compelling, turns out to actually be an argument begging the question. This as a matter of fact may turn out to be not a coincidence. Some other arguments for the presence of real objects in propositions are inconclusive in quite a like manner. This is what I want to argue in the next section.

2   Wishful Meaning

David Kaplan has also made a case —convincingly, for many— for Russellian singular propositions, propositions that have real individuals as a constituent, and that can be modeled, in a roughly equivalent fashion, in a possible worlds framework using rigid designators. Certain singular terms are supposed to contribute such individuals, and nothing else. Most notoriously indexical and demonstrative terms are taken to do so, but also proper names, and constructions headed by an operator of Kaplan's own making: 'dthat[the ϕ]'.

---

can be legitimately stated, but also possibly be consistently denied.

[6]The term is from Kripke himself, Kripke 1981, p. 4.

Kaplan is considered to be someone who has succeeded in demonstrating propositions of this kind in, e.g., the following quotes.

> *Russell's analysis [part of an "old and common-sensical theory about language"] of the proposition expressed by 'John is tall.' provides it with two components, the property expressed by the predicate 'is tall' and the individual John.* THAT'S RIGHT, JOHN HIMSELF, RIGHT THERE, TRAPPED IN A PROPOSITION.*' (Kaplan 1978, p. 223, capitals mine)
>
> *Thus, for example, the utterances (in English):*
>
> *(13) He [the speaker points at John, as John stands on the demonstration platform nude, clean shaven, and bathed in light] is suspicious.*
>
> *(14) He [the speaker points at John, as John lurks in shadows wearing a trenchcoat, bearded, with his hat pulled down over his face] is suspicious.*
>
> *are taken (...) as expressing the same proposition, namely:*
>
> *(15) ⟨John, P⟩.* (Kaplan 1978, p. 230–1)

That there are propositions of this kind is a popular view among philosophers and linguists, but it can seriously be doubted that, e.g., by means of the quotes, any proposition has been demonstrated at all.

A first, and actually quite embarrassing, question should be: "But who or what is this John, in the propositions that appear to be presented so transparently here?" Kaplan has written, and published, the above lines, employing, in each fragment, the name '*John*' various times. Surely we are expected to understand all these uses as intended to be referring to some individual, and actually as referring multiple times to one and the same individual in each fragment. But has Kaplan thereby succeeded in demonstrating a proposition in which he, John himself, has been trapped? We may conclude so, if we can assume that the singular term 'John' has been used, repeatedly, as a directly referential term, and has served, only, to contribute that individual to the proposition that Kaplan may have meant to demonstrate. I believe this is actually false.

I seriously cannot believe that Kaplan wanted us to identify, or know of, some John that he was referring to, and to acknowledge that we find him, that's right, John himself, trapped in some, to be demonstrated, proposition. Surely it seems to be fair to Kaplan to suppose that he aimed to present a generic form of a singular proposition, using a generic or exemplary *John* inside of it. Yet a generic or exemplary *John* is not a real individual. It seems to me that Kaplan has, thus, at best given us something of an *idea* of a singular proposition, and not demonstrated a real one. Note that I do not object to having ideas of things, but I am opposed here to equivocating ideas of things with things.[7]

---

[7]The last reflection may still sound unfair to Kaplan, but I think it is hard to do any better. Surely I understand that we should read the second example above as if it describes a situation that actually happens, and as if the sentences have actually been uttered in the way portrayed

Apart from the previous considerations about Kaplan's somewhat 'idealist' demonstration, there is one more point that needs to be emphasized. Even in our charitable understanding of Kaplans examples the intended conclusion depends, *entirely*, on the generous supposition that the name "John", in *Kaplan's own use* of it, figures as a directly referential one, a supposition that has so far not been established to be true or correct.

It appears that the more elaborate Kaplan 1989 provides some of the required additional motivation for precisely this idea, that certain terms indeed are directly referential. Let us first try and see more precisely what picture it is that is presented here.

> [**Principle 2**] *Indexicals, pure and demonstrative alike, are directly referential.* (Kaplan 1989, p. 492)
>
> *I intend to use 'directly referential' for an expression whose referent, once determined, is taken as fixed for all possible circumstances, i.e., is taken as* being *the propositional component.* (p. 493)
>
> *[I]n the case of a singular term which is directly referential, the constituent of the proposition is just the object itself. (...) [T]he constituent (corresponding to a rigid designator) just* is *the object.* (p. 494)

While Kaplan presents his principle, repeatedly, as "*obvious*" and "*uncontroversial*", he devotes two section of his paper, sections V and IX, pp. 498–500, 512–17, to provide an "Argument for Principle 2", concluding, among other things, "that with respect to the problem of associating propositions with utterances the direct reference theory is *correct*." (p. 517, italics mine)

At the start of the first of these two section, Kaplan, however, immediately tempers the stated ambitions: "But I had best distinguish it [Principle 2] from similar principles which are false." (p. 498) As we will see, that is what Kaplan actually achieves: successfully, I think, refuting one such alternative 'theory', a 'Fregean Theory', so-called; he does not, however, provide an independent argument for his own principle.

Section V discusses some examples that are said "to establish the following."

---

by Kaplan. But what would, thereby, have been demonstrated then? There woud have to be an individual John, *in our understanding of the narrative*, that would figure as a real constituent in a proposition, *likewise understood*. Observe that the proposition, so understood, would still be as imaginary as this very John in our understanding or imagination would be. Some imaginary John would have been trapped in a proposition that in its turn would have been trapped in our understanding of the narrative. Our understanding of it will not help in making John, or the proposition that he is supposed to figure in, any more real. His identity is an intentional identity, not a real one, let alone, a necessary one.

(T1) The descriptive meaning of a pure indexical determines the referent of the indexical with respect to a context of use but is either inapplicable or irrelevant to determining a referent with respect to a circumstance of evaluation.

I hope that your intuition will agree with mine that it is for this reason that:

(T2) When what was said in using a pure indexical in a context c is to be evaluated with respect to an arbitrary circumstance, the relevant object is always the referent of the indexical with respect to the context c.

This is just a slightly elaborated version of Principle 2. (p. 500)

It is indeed hard to disagree with (T1), but proceeding from the (mainly negative) (T1) to the (positive) (T2) is jumping to conclusions. While we agree that a *circumstance of evaluation is not* decisive for determining the referent of an indexical, and also that for the interpretation of an indexical the object determined in the *context of use is* relevant, this does not imply that *the relevant object, always*, is this object.[8]

Consider example (4), which Kaplan deems equivalent with (5).

See how rigidly the indexicals cling to the referent determined in the context of use:

(4) It is possible that in Pakistan, in five years, only those who are actually here now are envied.

The point of (4) is that the circumstance, place, and time referred to by the indexicals 'actually', 'here', and 'now' are the circumstance, place, and time of the context, not a circumstance, place, and time determined by the modal, locational, and temporal operators within whose scope the indexicals lie. (...)

(5) $(\exists w)(\exists p)(\exists t)(w = $ the actual circumstance $\land\ p = here\ \land\ t = now\ \land\ \Diamond$ In Pakistan In five years $\forall x(x$ is envied $\to x$ is located at p during t in w)) (Kaplan 1989, p. 499)

For Kaplan's observations to stand up to his conclusions, we must assume that what the terms 'here', and 'now' actually refer to in the context of use, are not just the relevant actual referents in the examples, but also the same real object (place, time) that the terms refer to in the scope of the various operators, and that they are also the (only) possible values of the quantified variables 'p' and 't' in the scope of '$\Diamond$ In Pakistan In five years' in (5). This has not been shown or argued for. It would have been argued for if, and I think only if, we would

---

[8]As, likewise, Kaplan must be relevant for the interpretation of 'the paper by Kaplan', it is the paper, not Kaplan, that should be deemed the relevant object when using the phrase.

think of 'here' and 'now', and of the (quantified) variables 'p' and 't' in (5), as being used as rigid designators, here. Kaplan is, obviously, quite explicit that he indeed thinks these terms are used rigidly:[9] But, as in the previous section, it must already have been settled that the relevant terms are rigid, to now supply motivation for the conclusion that they are. Surely this is not what was intended to be demonstrated.

Essentially the same point can be made regarding Kaplan's second argument, in section IX, concerning demonstratives. The arguments that he presents there again suffice to disqualify what is called the 'Fregean Theory', and they indeed makes a good case for the relevance of "the individual demonstrated in the context which *did* generate the proposition being evaluated." But he does not actually succeed in showing that that particular individual, a real individual that figures in some actual situation, is the one relevant for determining the truth-value of the proposition under other possible circumstances, which are counterfactual, so arguably not real. As we have seen above, some such conclusion would be licensed if it were guaranteed that, whenever x is a real object d, then in order to find out whether x has a property P in some possibility, then we must inspect whether d has that property in that possibility. This is a actually a somewhat cumbersome way of supposing that whenever x is d, then necessarily so, for any x and d. In short, we have to assume a Kripkean necessity of identities, in order to be licensed to conclude that demonstratives are directly referential. Again, a rigidity of terms and a necessity of identities is here assumed, not demonstrated.

3   Conclusion

In this note I have inspected two, seminal, sources in which certain singular terms are argued to directly or rigidly denote individuals that are presented as inhabiting possibilities, or propositions, thereby motivating the conclusion that identity statements that directly involve such individuals are necessary.

Kripke has given a seemingly independent intuitive clarification for the latter idea that the identity of objects is necessary, but I have argued that his clarification is circular. I have argued that Kaplan's intended demonstrations of direct reference are circular, too. In both cases the intended results, no matter how compelling and appealing, are already assumed to be correct, and are not taken to follow from logical reasoning or empirical fact.

Surely the picture presented by Kripke and Kaplan is one that we eagerly embrace. Yet, there remains a fundamental and nagging question: it it at all possible to construct an argument, one that has to be formulated in some language or so, that there are constituents of meaning independent of any language and of our minds?

---

[9] "[F]ree variables under an assignment of values are paradigms of what I have been calling *directly referential terms*." (p. 484)

References

Frege, Gottlob 1984. Thoughts. In: Brian McGuinness (ed.) *Gottlob Frege. Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell. pp. 351–372. Originally appeared as "Der Gedanke. Eine logische Untersuchung", 1918.

Hintikka, Jaakko 1969. Semantics for Propositional Attitudes. In: John Whitney Davis, Donald J. Hockney & W.K. Wilson (eds.) *Philosophical Logic*, Dordrecht: Reidel. pp. 21–45.

Kaplan, David 1978. Dthat. In: Peter Cole (ed.) *Syntax and Semantics, 9: Pragmatics*, New York: Academic Press. pp. 221–243.

Kaplan, David 1989. Demonstratives. An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and other Indexicals. In: Joseph Almog, John Perry & Howard K. Wettstein (eds.) *Themes from Kaplan*, New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 481–563.

Kripke, Saul 1981. *Naming and Necessity*. Oxford: Blackwell. Paperback edition of the revised and enlarged edition of Kripke, 1972.

Lewis, David 1968. Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic. *Journal of Philosophy* 65, pp. 113–126.

Russell, Bertrand (ed.) 1919. *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*. London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd.