A Defense of the Descriptive Theory of Names and its Epistemic Applications

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A DEFENSE OF THE DESCRIPTIVE THEORY OF NAMES
AND ITS EPISTEMIC APPLICATIONS

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Western Michigan University, 1997

In recent decades the description theory of names has come under substantial attack from causal theorists. The most influential formulation of these attacks can be found in the writings of Ruth Barcan Marcus and Saul Kripke. In examining the modal argument, I conclude that the problem is essentially an incompatibility between the description theory and certain levels of modal involvement; since the description theory appears better grounded than does modal logic, the objection seems misguided. The second argument raises concerns about our ability to refer to objects despite our having limited or false beliefs about those objects. In order to defuse this argument I use a cluster theory as well as a "Resealing" of the causal theory to show that we can still preserve reference under the descriptivist view despite incomplete or false beliefs.

Finally, I use description theory to solve the referential argument leveled against indirect theories of perception. If correct, this solution provides the basis for a sophisticated epistemology that starts with phenomenal and introspective data, but has the resources to permit reference to--and naming of--objects with which we are not immediately acquainted.
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Richard J. Van Every
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A REVIEW OF DESCRIPTION THEORY

Russell's 1905 article, "On Denoting," has been one of the most intensively discussed articles of the last 100 years. "On Denoting" not only marked Russell's break from his previous views (expounded in The Principles of Mathematics), but it also provided the basis for his descriptive theory of names. Since then, Russell's view has come under significant fire from direct reference theorists, most notably Saul Kripke, Ruth Barcan Marcus, David Kaplan, and Keith Donnellan.\(^1\) Despite the substantial criticisms offered by the direct reference theorists, I believe that Russell's 1905 view was, on the whole, correct. In this paper I will argue that the description theory gives the best account of our use of names as well as the logical mapping of denoting phrases. Secondly, I will show that the description theory is capable of meeting the most notable objections raised against it.

The divide between the description theory and the direct reference theory has become so heated that all of the possible applications of the former view have not been given sufficient attention by philosophers. Hence, in the second half of this paper I will use the description theory to develop the basis for a sophisticated epistemology that starts with phenomenal and introspective data, but has the resources to permit reference to-and naming of-objects with which we are not immediately acquainted. If my application of the descriptive theory is successful, the description theory lays the basis for a strong foundationalist epistemology that avoids the pitfalls of solipsism.
Examples of definite descriptions include “the author of Waverley,” “the present King of England,” “the first man on the moon,” and any description that has the form “the so-and-so.” For the most part, Russell treats proper names as definite descriptions. The only logically proper names that Russell recognizes are “This” or “That” combined with ostensive pointing. He writes, “The thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description.”

In order to explain Russell’s theory of descriptions it will be useful to have an example in mind. Consider the following proposition:

(1) The Queen of England is insane.

According to Russell, what this proposition asserts is that there is some entity who reigns as a female sovereign over England, there is only one such entity, and that entity has the property of being insane.

The first point that immediately strikes one is that the logical form of a sentence is drastically different from the grammatical form. That is, the grammatical proposition stated in (1) is logically equivalent to three related propositions.

1(a) There is some entity who reigns as a female sovereign over England.

1(b) There is only one such entity.

1(c) That entity has the property of being insane.

Notice that the second sentence is used only to preserve the uniqueness expressed by “the” in example (1). If one wished, one could rewrite 1 to say, “There is one and only one entity who reigns as a female sovereign over England.” This would serve the function
of both 1a and 1b, but strictly speaking 1a and 1b serve different roles in the logical form of the proposition expressed in 1. For this reason I have kept them separate.

The next important point to note is that the denoting phrase “The Queen of England” has been reductively eliminated from the logical proposition. This is essential to Russell’s view. He states that every denoting phrase is meaningless by itself. However, any properly formed sentence that contains such a phrase will have a meaning.4

This theory is a significant departure from the theory he expounded in “The Principles of Mathematics.” There he argued that denoting phrases are undefinable logical constants. In fact, he tried to explain them as being a relational property. There is no need to give a detailed explanation of this view here; suffice to say that Russell was motivated to eliminate denoting phrases by the failure of his earlier view.

I take this second point to be the essence of Russell’s theory of description. The denoting phrase “The Queen of England” is no more a logical constituent of a proposition, than is the Queen herself. It is this elimination of denoting phrases that allows us to have knowledge of things with which we are never acquainted with. Russell writes, “The chief importance of knowledge by description is that it enables us to pass beyond the limits of our private experience.”5

In the above example, I was never directly acquainted with the sense-data caused by the Queen of England, not to mention any acquaintance with the actual object. Yet my claim that she is insane is traced back to something I am acquainted with. In this case I have seen pictures of the Queen and read news reports about her. Hence a chain of descriptions forms that leads back to some object of acquaintance. In many cases this
chain is quite long, but regardless of its length, something with which I am acquainted must be at the end of the chain.

Notice that every constituent of a proposition we understand is one with which we are acquainted. Yet this results only because physical objects, minds, and denoting phrases are not constituents of propositions. Furthermore, which description is used in linking a physical object to sense-data is relatively unimportant.

If a person who knew Bismarck made a judgement about him... What this person was acquainted with were certain sense-data which he connected (rightly, we will suppose) with Bismarck’s body. His body, as a physical object, and still more his mind, were only known as the body and the mind connected with these sense-data. That is, they were known by description. It is of course, very much a matter of chance which characteristics of a man’s appearance will come into a friend’s mind when he thinks of him; thus the description actually in the friend’s mind is accidental. The essential point is that he knows that the various descriptions all apply to the same entity, in spite of not being acquainted with the entity.\(^6\)

Thus, even though we are never acquainted with quarks, planets, or any other example of matter we can still know a number of truths about them. And the logical form of propositions that express such knowledge is free of denoting phrases.
CLUSTER THEORY OF NAMES

Disguised Descriptions

The description theory deals nicely with denoting phrases, but the real questions seem to lie in the application of the description theory to proper names. Take the example “Socrates.” There happen to be several descriptions that come to mind when I use this name. I could be referring to “the teacher of Plato,” “the central character in many of the dialogues by Plato (or Xenophon),” or perhaps “the Greek philosopher forced to drink hemlock in the Crito.” So how do we determine which description is substitutable for the name “Socrates?” Note that for many such names it seems entirely arbitrary to pick any one definite description as the meaning of the name “Socrates.” One way to overcome this problem is to adopt some cluster theory in which names are not reducible to any one description, instead a number of descriptions may be substituted for the name. This allows any one description to turn out false, while still allowing the name “Socrates” to refer because a significant number of these other properties commonly attributed to him remain true.

Logical Sum of Properties

Kripke points out that there are a number of so-called cluster theories, some of which are stronger than others. Searle presents the strongest of the cluster views. He
argues that a particular attribute or even most of the attributes that one has in mind may turn out to be false, but at least some of them must hold. Kripke takes Searle to be going a step further when Searle writes:

Suppose we agree to drop "Aristotle" and say, "the teacher of Alexander," then it is a necessary truth that the man referred to is Alexander's teacher--but it is a contingent fact that Aristotle ever went into pedagogy.7

Searle's point is that Aristotle may not have been the actual teacher of Alexander, but that Aristotle necessarily has the collection of attributes commonly described to him. One of these attributes is that he is the teacher of Alexander. Kripke takes this point too lightly when he dismisses the cluster theory as one that "must clearly be false."8 Kripke is quick to mention that most of the properties we attribute to any one name could turn out to be either false or different in some possible world. Thus how could it be that Aristotle necessarily has "the logical sum" of the properties attributed to him? As long as "necessity" is being used in a manner similar to his own use of the word, Kripke says, it cannot.

But this is where Kripke's mistake occurs. To use the term "necessity" as he has done here would be to confuse de re and de dicto modality. In the above passage, Searle is making this very distinction. Searle's use of necessity here is given a purely de dicto reading of the modal operator. But he is not prohibited from giving the de re interpretation in which it is not a necessary fact about Aristotle that he was the teacher of anyone. Richard Fumerton writes,

It is true that Aristotle did not have to be F, but then the F did not have to be F either, and so this de re modal claim cannot constitute an
argument against viewing “Aristotle” and “the F” as synonymous. Kripke is perfectly aware of the relevance of making this distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* modality, but I fear his original arguments still get too much initial credibility by capitalizing on the equivocation.\(^9\)

Fumerton correctly points out that Kripke has equivocated on the scope of the modal operators, but this does not settle the issue. Kripke offers a valuable point by showing that for certain situations nearly all of the properties that normally qualify as definite descriptions could turn out to be false. Yet at the same time we wish to hold that the given name still applies or denotes. For a name, \(N\), is normally thought to have properties \(F, G, H,\ldots\). How many of these could be false and yet it would still be appropriate to say that \(N\) denotes? I will show later that how one answers this question depends on what type of properties one envisions \(F, G,\) and \(H\) as being.

**Flexible Cluster Theory**

Kripke’s comments along this line are far from being airtight, but perhaps they are strong enough to warrant a different view of the cluster theory. Wittgenstein offers a flexible version when he writes,

But when I make a statement about Moses,—am I always ready to substitute some *one* of these descriptions for “Moses”? I shall perhaps say: By “Moses” I understand the man who did what the Bible relates of Moses, or at any rate a good deal of it. But how much? Have I decided how much must be proved false for me to give up my proposition as false? Has the name “Moses” got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases?—Is it not the case that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from me and vice versa?\(^{10}\)

Wittgenstein points out that in some instances I do not have a description fixed before
my mind. However, in order to make sense of a proposition that contains the name “Moses,” one may ask “what do you mean by ‘Moses’?” My answer to this question will be determined, to a large extent, by the situation in which I find myself. Here we need to consider a couple of things.

First, the extent of my knowledge about an object matters a great deal. Take the name “Leon.” One possible description is that he is “the father of the author of this paper,” but clearly this is not all that comes to mind. In fact, in many cases this would not be the description that signifies the meaning of the name “Leon” for me. On the other hand, there is a large class of names in which I associate only a small number of descriptions. If I am asked what comes before my mind when I use a given name my answer will vary greatly depending on whether it is more like the former example (Leon) or the later case in which I have a limited number of descriptions to identify with the name.

Secondly, to whom I am speaking, and the purpose I have in mind by using a given name helps determine which descriptions are most appropriate. I ask my ethics class, “Is Socrates being ironic when he says he does not know what piety is?” What description best fits the meaning of “Socrates” in this example? Notice that it is not the case that I now have a particular property of Socrates in mind; indeed several descriptions could still be substituted for “Socrates.” But I have eliminated a number of other properties that normally are attributed to him. This is not because I have shown these other properties to be any less essential to Socrates; rather it is the context in which I use the name that eliminates them from consideration.
I have pointed out two versions of the cluster theory approach for a couple of reasons. First it has been argued that a more substantial modal criticism can be leveled against the description theory, and I shall have to consider that argument in turn. And secondly, perhaps the most important attribute of the description theory is that it allows independent speakers to use a number of divergent descriptions in identifying a given individual and still manage to co-refer. The cluster theory provides an extremely simple view of how this works.

Evidence in support of the cluster theory can be seen in its application to possible worlds talk. Consider Kripke's argument that names are rigid designators whereas definite descriptions are not. If names are rigid designators I hope to show, it is only in virtue of the fact that some cluster of descriptions actually serve as the meaning of the name.

To see this clearly we need to consider how Kripke defines rigid designation. He says, "Let's call something a rigid designator if in every possible world it designates the same object, a nonrigid or accidental designator if that is not the case." But if a rigid designator denotes the same object in every possible world, what counts as an "object"? Kripke maintains that we stipulate possible worlds, and hence we can imagine a case in which Nixon is not the US President in 1970. This seems correct: we don't discover a possible world. But when we stipulate one, what is it that we stipulate? When I imagine a situation in which Nixon lost the election I cannot help but imagine that several other descriptions, normally applicable to Nixon, still apply. Consider the following mental exercise: suppose Nixon were an automaton. Now does this automaton still look like
the actual Nixon did? Does the automaton still have the same dates of existence? It is
easy to imagine Nixon as being an automaton, but only because I have a vast number of
other descriptions by which he is known. Notice this does not seem to work (or at least
there is a strong intuitive argument against it) if we were to say that Nixon is a tree.
What could this mean? Even when I stipulate that Nixon is a tree am I saying anything
other than nonsense? Notice that if names are truly rigid, independent of descriptions,
saying “Nixon is a tree” ought to be meaningful. It seems that any meaningful reading
of possible worlds talk is going to rest on a de dicto reading of the modal operators, but
then there is no problem concerning definite descriptions.
DEFINITE DESCRIPTION DEFYING NAMES

“Russelling” the Causal Theory

Fumerton points to a second argument often cited by the causal theorists: for some names no definite description denoting the object comes to mind. He also begins to sketch out the details for a solution to this problem. Why not simply borrow the causal theorist’s chain of reference, once one has been worked out, and use that as the definite description? I do not think this is nearly as odd as it first sounds, and in many respects the description theory already uses a similar model for referring to objects like quarks, atoms, and the center of our galaxy. If my reference to these objects is successful it is because I rely on the expert opinion of scientists when I speak about such objects.

Fumerton uses the example “Dedefre.” Now it is doubtful that very many of us (besides historians) associate this name with a large number of descriptions, but this does not prohibit any one of us from using it to denote in a meaningful sentence. Fumerton offers the following definite description in its place, “the individual whose being called by some name was the first link in a complex causal chain resulting in this use of the name.” Assuming that the causal theorists have worked out the appropriate chain of reference leading back to the original “baptism” of someone or something with the name “Dedefre”, Fumerton proposes the above “Russelling” of the causal chain as the meaning.
In making this move, the descriptive theorist has far from conceded to the causal theorist. The descriptive theorist is maintaining that this chain of use can now either be used to fix the reference or as the meaning of a particular use of a proper name. The causal theorist, on the other hand, still wants to maintain that the chain of reference is a causal convention that allows us to arrive at the use of a given name. Hence the causal theorist might object that it is absurd to think that the chain of use is what one “means” when he uses a name like Dedefre. After all these chains are far too complex for anyone to keep in mind every time they use that name.

But as Fumerton points out, we often use expressions without being aware of how it is that we are using them. So what is needed for the descriptive theorist to capitalize on the “Russelling” of the causal theory in his use of Dedefre? Clearly I need not have explicitly rehearsed the chain of use in question. Going through such a process is a luxury that is both tedious and requires some reason for doing so. All that is needed is that the direct link(s) between my use of Dedefre and the person I picked it up from are, in theory,\(^{12}\) available if its use where called into question.

The second objection offered by the causal theorist tries to force the Russelian into an infinite regress. For example, Vesalius was the anatomist who named many of the blood vessels and muscles of the human body. Here my use of “Vesalius” might be equivalent to “the man whose being called by some name was the first link in a chain of
use that led to this use of "Vesalius." The problem arises in that "Vesalius" appears in the definite description, but what is the meaning of this use of that name? If we substitute the same description for this use we are on the road to an infinite regress that never gives us the meaning of our original use of "Vesalius."

A descriptive theorist can offer a couple of solutions. The first would be to argue that this is the wrong definite description for "Vesalius." The correct description would be something like, "the man who is called 'Vesalius' by the present community of historians." If this is the description we adopt, then one no longer has to offer a substitute for the name "Vesalius" in the description. To require one to do so would rest on a failure to distinguish between use and mention in the description. Fumerton shies away from this approach because it is possible that the historians disagree on their use of the name "Vesalius," and as a result, would be traced back to different first links. A second reason to reject this approach is the fact that we are concerned with a particular use of the name "Vesalius"--my use of it. In this case, I learned of Vesalius from a particular historian (although I cannot remember which), and not from the collection of the historic community as a whole. Hence, the meaning of my use of his name seems implicitly tied to that one source.
Location in a Causal Chain

The correct solution is one that borrows the strengths of both of the above attempts, while avoiding the pitfalls of any regress. The appropriate description will have to be sensitive to my place in the causal chain, thereby eliminating any need to bring in expert or communal use of a name. And it cannot contain the use of “Vesalius” as a name anywhere in the description. The following description accomplishes this: “The man whose dubbing represents the first link in a causal chain resulting in the sound ‘Vesalius’ being uttered by me.” Notice that I can rely on the use/mention distinction to avoid the regress argument, and at the same time avoid any difficulties incorporated in the common usage answer.

Of course it ought to be pointed out that Russellians only need to use the causal chain as a description for names in which no other definite description comes to mind. The causal theorist may think this is strange indeed, bordering on an ad hoc attempt to rescue an otherwise failing theory. I have tried to show that this is far from the truth, and that the success of denoting via these descriptions can already be seen in scientific discourse. I also wish to note that the number of instances in which no definite descriptions come to mind seem very rare. If the foregoing analysis is correct, then indeed, there are none.

Borrowing from the causal theorist aside, when is one most likely to use these definite description defying names? Perhaps the most frequent context is when we first learn of their existence. Suppose you are telling me about Cardinal Wolsey for the first
time. When I now use this name what else could I mean by Wolsey other than the person that you were talking about? As I learn more about Wolsey the number of descriptions I can associate with his name will change accordingly. This picture of language has, from the description theorist's point of view, three advantages. First it cannot help but strike an intuitive chord, but second it fits perfectly well with Fumerton's attempt to Russellize the causal theory. Seeing how language works in this way allows us to move on a continuum of descriptions. At the one end we have names for which a variety of definite descriptions are on hand, while at the opposite end we see names for which denoting is often difficult. Movement on this continuum becomes possible as our knowledge about a particular name grows. Finally, this view is entirely consistent with any one of the cluster views outlined above.
ARGUMENTS LEVELED AGAINST DESCRIPTIVE THEORY

The Modal Argument

I now wish to look at the modal argument leveled against the description theory. Quine has argued that trying to interpret certain levels of modal involvement leads to a host of difficulties. For example, in “The Problem of Interpreting Modal Logic,” he argues that several inconsistencies arise when one tries to quantify into modal contexts. Quine’s argument runs as follows:

(ii) An existential quantification holds if there is a constant whose substitution for the variable of quantification would render the matrix true.

Morning Star C Evening Star & □(Morning Star C Morning Star).

Therefore, according to (ii)

(1)  (∃x)(x C Evening Star & □(x C Morning Star)).

But also

(2)  (∃x)(x C Evening Star & -□(x C Morning star)).

Since the matrix quantified in (1) and the matrix quantified in (2) are mutual contraries, the x whose existence is affirmed in (1) and the x whose existence is affirmed in (2) are two objects; so there must be at least two objects x such that x C Evening Star.  

According to Quine, it would seem that the Evening Star and the Morning Star must be different objects; yet they name the same thing. The argument can be restated as thus: it is a contingent fact that the first heavenly body seen in the evening is also the
last heavenly body seen in the morning. We could imagine a counterfactual situation in which the Evening Star and the Morning star refer to different entities. Yet by the identity relation, an object must necessarily be identical to itself. So if Venus is identical to the first heavenly body seen in the evening, it must necessarily be identical to it, and the same can be said for the Morning star. But then how can it be a contingent fact that the Morning Star is identical to the Evening Star? It cannot be both a contingent fact and a necessary truth that the first heavenly body seen in the evening is identical to the last heavenly body seen in the morning.

Another example concerns the planet Neptune, which was discovered by observing certain perturbations in the orbit of Uranus. Hence an appropriate definite description of Neptune is “the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus.” Now we can imagine a counterfactual situation in which, Neptune is not the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus (i.e. ◊¬Pnu, where P means “__is the cause of the perturbations in ...,” n stands for Neptune, and u represents the planet Uranus). But it is necessary of anything that it is identical to itself (i.e. (x)(□Ix), where I means “is identical to”). Thus, “the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus” is necessarily “the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus.” But if Neptune is “the cause of the perturbations...,” and it might not have been, then we are left with the contradiction that both necessarily Pnu, and also possibly ¬Pnu.

Quine points out this contradiction in an effort to show that modal logic was “conceived in sin.” The contradiction is supposed to be resolved by abandoning modal logic. Unfortunately, this has not become the accepted view by the majority of
philosophers. Seeing the apparent dilemma in Quine's analysis, Ruth Barcan Marcus offers a solution that brings about the actual birth of the CT. She writes:

Consider the claim

\[(13) \quad ab\]

is a true identity. Now if (13) is such a true identity, then \(a\) and \(b\) are the same thing. It doesn't say that \(a\) and \(b\) are two things which happen, through some accident, to be one. True, we are using two different names for the same thing, but we must be careful about use and mention. If, then, (13) is true, it must say the same thing as

\[(14) \quad ala^{14}\]

Marcus's answer is simple. A description of an entity may contingently apply to an object. However, the relation of any object to itself remains a necessary one. So Neptune might not have been the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus, but the meaning of "Neptune" is the actual planet Neptune. And here necessarily "Neptune" is identical with the actual planet Neptune, but "Neptune" is not necessarily identical with "the cause of the perturbations in Uranus." Also if we decide that "Evening Star" and "Morning Star" are names to be analyzed along causal lines, rather than descriptions, then necessarily the Evening Star is congruent with the Morning Star. Under this interpretation, Quine's statement that 

\[\neg \Box (Evening\ Star \ C\ Morning\ Star)\]

would be false because it claims that 

\[\Box (Evening\ Star \ C\ Morning\ Star)\]

is true.

Essentially this becomes the bases of Marcus's theory of direct reference, that names directly denote actual objects, whereas descriptions do not. In making this move Marcus (along with Kripke) has tried to transform Quine's attack on modal logic and
place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the description theory.

What does this argument actually show? Is modality so firmly grounded that the Russellian needs to worry? First, we need to consider the argument more carefully. Notice that mutual contraries occur in Quine’s argument because he assumes that it is not a necessary truth that the Evening Star is congruent with the Morning star. There is nothing odd about this assumption, but it does presuppose a purely de dicto reading of the modal operators. If we were to give a de re reading of the argument no contradiction would occur. Hence the strength of Quine’s argument rests on our inability to give a consistent reading of the modal operators. But then this seems to be nothing more than a restatement of the argument we looked at above. And just as before, the description theory gains assistance from the cluster theory approach.

Perhaps I have not given Marcus a fair hearing. She might reply by saying that the problem of opaque modal operators only arises with the descriptive theory, but fails to hold for the causal theory. Some Russellians have agreed with her on this point, and as a result have tried to revise accordingly. One such attempt is offered by Plantinga, who asserts that definite descriptions imply actuality or implicitly contain the phrase “in the actual world.” If this is the case, then it would seem that Quine’s arguments against modality might not hold. In the actual world, the Evening Star is congruent with Morning Star. However, by allowing this alteration one drastically changes the traditional modal interpretations.

Second, if Plantinga’s solution is correct, then it requires changing our view of how modal operators function. For example, if I call the actual world W and label all
other worlds $W_1$, $W_2$, etc..., respectively, then how are we to translate the modal operators? It might look like this; to say “necessarily $x$ is $y$” no longer means that in all possible worlds “$x$ is $y$” is a true sentence, but instead it is correctly translated as in worlds $W_1$, and $W_2$, etc..., that the sentence “$x$ is $y$” is true in the actual world. This greatly confuses the already suspect modal approach. In fact, how is one ever to predicate modality to all possible worlds? Notice that this is not achieved by adding necessity to necessity. This only amounts to saying that in any world other than the actual it is a necessary truth that in the actual world a given proposition is true or necessarily true. In fact we could continue to add modal operators, and I fail to see how we could ever say that in all possible worlds $x$ is $y$.

The other solution for definite descriptions, the one proposed by Quine, is that we abandon modal logic altogether. Of course if I am correct in my evaluation of the first solution then, they are not as far from each other as one might originally assume: Plantinga himself is offering us a fairly radical departure from normal modal intuitions. However, this discussion has resulted by viewing the problem from the wrong end. Even if we set Quine’s criticisms aside, modal semantics encounter some strong difficulties (particularly in the S4 and S5 systems). The Kripke/ Marcus attack requires a specific reading of the modal operators “necessarily” and “possibly.” Two criticisms can be raised in doing this. First, what reading of the modal operators is the correct one? The description theory could just as easily give a semantical reading of these operators that does not infringe upon definite descriptions. Hence, what one needs is some reason for using a particular reading of the operators. Second, if modal logic is
supposed to explain the ideas of possibility and necessity, then can any non-circular account of these terms be offered?

It is this second criticism that is both the hardest to get a handle on, and at the same time offers the most problems for a formal account of modality. Consider the following example:

When you ask whether it is necessary or contingent that *Nixon* won the election, you are asking the intuitive question whether in some counterfactual situation, *this* man would in fact have lost the election.\(^{16}\)

We can represent the claim that Nixon might have lost the election as,

\[ \Box a \]

(2)

Here \( a \) represents the claim that Nixon lost the election. Many of us will have certain intuitions about what this claim means, but then again these intuitions are often unclear and will differ amongst philosophers. Hence, if modal logic is truly successful it ought to clarify these intuitions and offer them some grounding, namely what is meant by possibility in (2). According to Kripke, (2) is equivalent to saying that in some possible world Nixon lost the election. But what could Kripke mean by a counterfactual situation other than the situation "in some possible world"? This clearly will not suffice, for it puts the leaves the notion of possibility in the following dilemma. If Kripke simply means possible worlds talk to be another rendering of the formal semantics, than he still needs to offer us an informal interpretation of what he means by possible worlds. On the other hand, if possible worlds talk is taken as the informal reading of the semantics, then he is has circularly defined the notion of possibility.

In *Philosophy of Logics*, Susan Haack takes this criticism a step further. She
writes:

But, as I now see it, there is a deeper question to be asked; is one entitled to require, as Lewis does, that the intuitive account with which one is supplied at the level of depraved semantics give a non-circular, explanatory account of the formal semantic?¹⁷

Haack argues that in order to classify model logic as a sentence logic (i.e. valid arguments depend entirely on sentence structure), one needs an informal reading of the formal semantics connecting our intuitions about possible and necessity with the set-theoretical notation. In other words, what criteria do we have for evaluating the truth conditions for (2)? Certainly I do not believe that Nixon had to win the election. Of course he could have lost, but is there any “epistemically independent” criterion for saying this? That is, I should be able to tell whether there is a possible world in which a certain state of affairs exists independent from my beliefs about this state of affairs.

The mere possibility of any such criterion seems highly unlikely. First it would have to be devoid of the terms “necessarily,” “possibly,” “counterfactual situation,” or any of their cognates. Secondly, if they are to be accepted at all, such criteria need to remain true to the intuitions that led to their development in the first place. To see this more clearly consider the claim that □(x'y). Now I can give this a purely formal reading like “Necessarily, x is identical to y” or “It is false that in some counterfactual situation, x is not identical to y.” But as we have seen, this in turn, needs to be interpreted as well. Haack points out that we could give an unproblematic interpretation which differs from the natural language readings of modality. In fact, I think Plantinga’s reading of the modal operators is (unknowingly) reducible to this. Hence Plantinga would say that, “in
all possible worlds, it is true in the actual world that $x$ is identical to $y$. " This seems a strange notion of necessity to say the least, that is it looses the intuitive force that it initially held. On the other hand, Haack points out that any of the natural readings of the operators are “apt to violate the requirement of epistemic independence.”

Now we can restate Kripke’s main argument against description theory and reevaluate it accordingly.

(1) Names are always rigid designators, that is they denote the same thing in every possible world.
(2) Definite descriptions are not rigid designators.

(3) Therefore, names are not disguised definite descriptions.

Two objections to this argument have already been given. First, in arguing that definite descriptions are not rigid Kripke has equivocated on his use of necessity. His argument gains undue support from the confusion generated by the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction that he fails to keep clear. Secondly, he assumes the validity of modal logic. It is this second fault that seems particularly problematic in light of the criticisms offered by Haack. Quine writes,

> Where two priorities come into conflict, either one is capable of prevailing. Statements close to experience and seemingly verified by the appropriate experiences may be occasionally given up.... But to overrule a multiplicity of such statements, if they reinforce one another and are sustained by different observers, would invite criticism.¹⁹

As we shall see the description theory not only reinforces our observations, but it helps to shape them into an important piece of the epistemic puzzle. Thus if this is the only argument to be offered it should provide little in the way of an obstacle to the description theory.
However, another problem seems to exist in Kripke's argument. According to Kripke's definition of a rigid designator it must designate the same thing in every possible world, but then what is this thing that it designates? One answer to this question is that some property or bundle of properties is being designated. However, this answer is not open to the causal theorist, since any such property would be grounds for an appropriate definite description. Instead Kripke writes:

Don't ask: how can I identify this table in another possible world, except by its properties? I have the table in my hands, I can point to it, and when I ask whether it might have been in another room, I am talking, by definition, about it. Kripke objects to the idea that physical objects are bundles of qualities, nor does he accept the notion that there exists some object behind these qualities. But then what are we to make of this it that we are talking about by definition when we use proper names? In order to make sense of the concept of a rigid designator this question must be answered, and in doing so the causal theorist is prohibited from any answer that can serve as a definite description. Without supplying any support for this first premiss Kripke can only rely on his intuitions. But the descriptive theorist has different intuitions that seem equally strong. However, this argument is meant to pull the descriptive theorist away from his theory in support of the direct reference view. To rest on intuitions that run counter to the descriptive theorist will be fail to be persuasive.

The Epistemic Argument

The final argument against the description theory that I will look at also comes
from Marcus and Kripke. Consider Russell’s example, “Scott is the author of Waverley.” Presumably one could only know this a posteriori. How else could I know that “Scott” is the author of Waverley? But, if Scott expresses the same description as “the author of Waverley,” and I know who or what Scott is, I must know that it expresses that sense independent of any particular experience. Since this is not the case one is lead to believe that names can not be disguised descriptions.

Kripke provides an interesting example:

(3) “Gödel proved the incompleteness of arithmetic” is true.

Now what does “Gödel” refer to in (3)? If it is synonymous with the description given in the predicate, then I am merely stating a tautology. And secondly, if it turned out that Schmidt actually “proved the incompleteness of arithmetic,” then by “Gödel,” the speaker actually referred to Schmidt. And as a result, anything I predicate to “Gödel” will actually be attributed to Schmidt. Hence we could never say that my initial belief (that Gödel proved the incompleteness of arithmetic) is false. Clearly this can not be the case, otherwise one would be forced to abandon epistemology altogether. If we knew a priori that “Gödel” expressed the same sense as the description, then we could proceed to attribute properties to Gödel, while still preserving a metaphysical distinction in which such beliefs could turn out to be false. Kripke writes:

Does it follow from [(3)] that we believe that Gödel proved the incompleteness of arithmetic—that we attribute the incompleteness of arithmetic to this man? No. Not just from that. We have to be referring to Gödel when we say “Gödel proved the incompleteness of arithmetic.” If, in fact, we were always referring to Schmidt, then we would be attributing the incompleteness of arithmetic to Schmidt and not to Gödel—if we used the sound “Gödel” as the name of the man whom I am calling
If my original thesis is correct—namely that description theory provides the basis for a sophisticated epistemology—then obviously this argument must be refuted. The description cannot both enrich and impoverish epistemology in the same breath. To understand the mistake contained in the above argument we first need to grasp what Russell was trying to accomplish in *On Denoting*. Russell meticulously lays out the logical criterion for denoting phrases. His analysis successfully eliminates denoting phrases as logical constants of propositions. Secondly, he clearly abandons the notion that denoting phrases have any “sense” (in Fregean terms). In short, identity statements like (3) are not supposed to provide the meaning of a name, but are used instead as the logical criteria for fixing the reference of a name.

With this in mind, has the above argument been faithful to Russell’s position? In *Names and Descriptions*, Leonard Linsky writes:

I think it certain that what Kripke calls the “Frege-Russell view” was not Frege’s view at all. Was it Russell’s view? I think it equally certain that it was not Russell’s view either. For one thing, Russell held that descriptions did not have sense. He thought the sense/reference distinction was incoherent, so he could not have held that names are identical in sense with descriptions.

How does this affect the epistemic argument offered against the Russellian view? As it turns out Kripke’s example that “Gödel” might refer to Schmidt is false. We can express (3) as

\[(3') \exists x (Fx \& Gx)\]

is true.

We can interpret 3' as “there exists some entity x, such that it is both F and G.” In other
words, there is one and only one entity that proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, and
that entity is identical to Gödel. If Schmidt actually proved the incompleteness of
arithmetic, than 3' is rendered false because Gx does not hold. Russell writes:

No one outside a logic-book ever wishes to say "x is x," and yet assertions of identity are often made in such forms as "Scott was the
author of Waverley" or "thou art the man." The meaning of such
propositions cannot be stated without the notion of identity, although
they are not simply statements that Scott is identical with another term,
the author of Waverley, or thou art identical with another term, the man.
The shortest statement of "Scott is the author of Waverley" seems to be
"Scott wrote Waverley; and it is always true of y that if y wrote
Waverley, y is identical with Scott." It is in this way that identity enters
into "Scott is the author of Waverley," and it is owing to such uses that
identity is worth affirming. 23

Descriptions fix the referent of a name not because they express the same sense as the
name, but rather because they express some of the truth conditions that must be met if
an identity relation is to hold. If the truth conditions are not met for the definite
description, then they can not be met by the expression of the statement in quantified
notation either.

Suppose one of the definite descriptions I use to pick out Nixon turned out to be
false, or actually applied more accurately to someone else. For example, maybe Nixon
never had a dog named Checkers (perhaps it was his wife’s dog.) If the above criticism
is correct, whenever I use the phrase Nixon in the possible world where Checkers was
Pat Nixon’s dog, I am actually referring to his wife. I think this is absurd, but then why
am I still successful in referring to Nixon? The reason I still refer to Nixon despite my
mistaken belief is that I have a whole host of descriptions by which I identify Nixon.
Hence it seems that the above criticism only comes into play in those particular cases
where I have a very limited number of descriptions associated with a given name. Consider the Gödel example. The only thing I know is that he offered a proof showing the incompleteness of arithmetic. Therefore, Kripke assumes this is the only definite description that comes to mind. However a second description can be generated by capitalizing on the causal theorist's solution (once he has one fully worked out): "The man whose name represents the first link in a causal chain resulting in the sound 'Gödel' being uttered." If these two descriptions do not refer to the same person, if Schmidt actually offered the proof, then I did not succeed in referring to Gödel. On the other hand I did not refer to Schmidt either, because it is doubtful that Schmidt also fulfills this second description. Not only does this solution strike me as the correct one, but it also matches our intuition that speaker knowledge ought to significantly affect one's ability to both refer to individuals as well as attribute properties to them.

It is precisely these features of Russell's theory of descriptions that provide real benefits for the epistemologist. The theory of descriptions requires only the existential quantifier for its success. Second, exactly which set of descriptions is used in fixing the reference of a name turns on the context of use as well as the speaker's own knowledge.

Kripke takes great care to preserve the role intuitions play in the justificatory process. He finds them to be "heavy evidence in favor" of a theory. However, if one does not share Kripke's intuitions there seems to be nothing he can do. It is also curious that Kripke's main argument against the theory of descriptions depends entirely on quantification in modal logic. The semantics for modal logic are far from self evident, resting as they do on our intuitions about what might or might not have been the case.
It is also doubtful that any non-circular definition of possibility can be offered. At some point in this chain our intuitions simply run dry. What does it mean to say necessarily, necessarily, possibly P? I doubt whether this has meaning at all. Simply devising a consistent formal semantics (as Kripke has done) is not enough. We ought to require more than this, namely that it has some correspondence with the way things are.
However, what I now wish to show is that the strongest evidence in favor of the description theory is its application in epistemology. First, does the descriptivist theory give us knowledge beyond our private experiences? Consider Russell's example: "Bismarck was an astute diplomat." According to the Russelian analysis, Bismarck is equivalent to a denoting phrase like "the first Chancellor of the German Empire." Hence the logical analysis of the above proposition is: there is some entity that is the first Chancellor of the German Empire, there is only one such entity, and that entity has the property of being an astute diplomat. Since I have never been acquainted with the Chancellor, this would be broken down further into things I have read about him and images of Germany that I have seen. It is these things with which I am acquainted that form the constituents of the proposition expressed above. Russell states as much in the following excerpt.

That is to say, when we say anything about Bismarck, we should like, if we could, to make the judgement which Bismarck alone can make, namely, the judgement of which he himself is a constituent. In this we are necessarily defeated, since the actual Bismarck is unknown to us. But we know that there is an object B, called Bismarck, and that B was an astute diplomatist.  

But herein lies the difficulty with Russell's attempt. How is it that we know there is an "object B, called Bismarck"? One might first wish to know exactly what Russell
means by an “object B.” If he is simply referring to sense-data or one of the other objects of acquaintance, then knowledge by description yields nothing more than knowledge about that particular personal experience. But this is in direct conflict with Russell’s conclusion that knowledge by description allows us to pass beyond the limits of private experience.25

Therefore, by “object,” Russell must mean the cause of my sense-data. This is all very well, but of course merely invoking the description theory will not enable us to say with justification that such objects exist: this is a problem that will take more than a theory of reference to resolve. Nevertheless, a theory of reference is necessary in order to make indirect realism work; we need to be able to refer to and name objects in order to make realist-style claims about their existence. And from this point of view, the descriptive theory seems to offer some clear benefits.

First, Russell has given a plausible account of how we can have knowledge of objects with which we are not acquainted. This seems particularly important in science. It is doubtful that any of us are acquainted with quarks, black holes, or electrons, but knowledge by description still allows us to have knowledge about these things (granting that they exist or have existed), and more importantly the theory of descriptions allows us to refer to them. Secondly, if physical objects exist, then Russell’s account paves the way for knowledge about them.

So is it possible to save Russell’s theory? To accomplish this one would need to adopt a more traditional epistemic stance. Descriptivist theory starts with the assumption that direct realism is false. If direct realism were possible, then the number
of things with which I have acquaintance would grow substantially. Hence one would have little need for the theory of descriptions in answering the initial epistemic questions. But, if one could support a plausible theory of indirect realism Russell might have a way out. This would have to be a representative theory of perception, in which sense-data are caused by the physical objects that resembled them. Following this, sense-data could be shown as descriptions of the actual physical objects which cause them.

Indirect Realism

Of course indirect realism is has come under heavy attack from the beginning and as a result many doubts remain. Perhaps it would be more prudent to speak of Indirect Realist theories, since a number of different views are possible. The view I intend to defend is what Mackie calls the "picture-original theory of perception." According to this view the "pictures" or sense-data that I perceive are purely mind dependent. In turn, my awareness of these indexical objects both resembles and is caused by physically real objects.

The principle objection to this essentially Lockean view can be stated thus: objects may appear to me a certain way, but we have no way of knowing that these appearances resemble the cause of the indexical object. Stronger and weaker versions of this argument exist. On the one hand, the criticism might simply suggest that we have no way of knowing that the sense-data resembles the actual object enough to justify statements concerning the actual object. On the other hand, the phenomenalist might wish to use this as grounds for rejecting the entire notion of mind-independent objects.
Bennett writes:

Locke puts the objective world, the world of "real things," beyond our reach on the other side of the veil of perception; so I call this aspect of his thought his "veil-of-perception doctrine." The more usual label, "representative theory of perception," is unsatisfactory because it does not express what is wrong with the theory. There is nothing wrong with saying that when I see a tree my visual field "represents" a real thing with which I am confronted. Nor is it objectionable to say that I see the tree by the mediation of my ideas or visual sense-data, if this means that without the sense-data I should not see the tree, or that my having those sense-data is part but not the whole of my seeing of the tree. "But isn't it objectionable if it means that your seeing of the tree is only indirect?" I do not know, because I cannot find clear meaning in the uses philosophers of perception make of "direct" and its cognates.27

Bennett's conclusion rests on the assumption that we are justified in saying "A causes B only if we are at some time directly acquainted with A."28 The phenomenalist attack can be stated as thus:

(1) The observation of sense-data is the only evidence for the existence of objective objects.
(2) In order to be justified in saying A is the cause of B, one must have direct evidence (independent from B) that A exits.
(3) The existence of sense-data cannot be justification for the existence of objective objects.

Bennett is not the only philosopher to raise this attack against the indirect realist.

Woozley writes,

Now such a theory of sense perception might conceivably be possible, for, so far as I can discover, it does not contain any internal self-contradictions. But it does suffer from the grave disadvantage that if it is true Locke (or anybody else) is by its very truth precluded from ever knowing, or even having the slightest reason for supposing, that it is true;...29

If the phenomenal argument is correct, then indirect realism is necessarily defeated from
the outset considering that an essential feature of this view is that physical objects are never known to us directly. Woozley later adds,

Now we are in the position of men faced with a painting, possessed of no other information at all, and asked not only whether it is a copy but also whether it is a good or bad copy. How could one possibly say? To tell whether a copy is good or not I must be able to compare copy with original, either this copy with its original, or copy with other copies and those with originals. If at every point I am prevented from comparing copy with original, then I can never have any reason for supposing that it is a good or a bad copy, let alone indicating in which respects it is good or bad.30

The Problem of Justification and the Problem of Reference

The Bennett/ Woozley criticism is best seen as really two problems. The first objection is expressed most accurately above. Here the concern is with the evidence in support of objective realities, that is, can I be justified in making the inference from sense-data to physical objects? The second objection contained expressly in Bennett’s treatment of Locke has to do with the problem of referring to a reality outside of our ideas. If I start with purely phenomenal and introspective data and grant that this is all I have acquaintance with, then how is it that I can refer to anything other than these ideas. Starting from these premisses one has no way out of the solipsistic circle.

These two objections often get stated as one due to the close relationship they seem to share. Indeed if the second objection is correct, then it would seem that the first consideration no longer arises. We would have no way to even pose the question about the existence of “real objects.” Thus Bennett finds the entire distinction between indirect and direct perception unintelligible.
Solution to the Problem of Reference

However, it is this problem of reference that the theory of descriptions is capable of solving. Under this view, any expressible propositions will be one that is made up entirely of entities that I am directly acquainted with. Now this does not mean that all meaningful statements will be about only those entities with which I am directly acquainted. To make this logical jump would involve the following two premisses:

1. If $A$ is a part of my experience, then $A$ is perceived.
2. It is impossible to separate the remaining content of experience from what is being perceived.\(^{31}\)

Mackie successfully argues that both of these premisses are false. The first leads to an infinite regress. For example, when I go for a walk in the woods one of the things that I am aware of is the fact that I am having certain perceptions. However, since this is part of my experience I must be perceiving my perceptions. But then this too becomes part of my experience and thus \textit{ad infinitum}. The second premiss is equally false. Berkeley thought that any attempt to conceive of an unperceived object led to a contradiction because it would be self-referential.\(^{32}\) However, what Berkeley’s position assumes is that for any such conception to be possible I must have a particular object in mind, thus I would be perceiving it. Of course I imagine that all sorts of objects exist, which I have never perceived. But just because I am now imagining that such objects exists it does not follow that I must be currently conceiving of them. In fact, since I am not even aware of what some of the objects are I am necessarily precluded from conceiving of them. Not only is this assumption false, but it fails to prove that objects
exist because they are being perceived. And it is this conclusion that Berkeley is trying to reach.\(^{33}\)

When we look at a table what we perceive is sense-data. But this is not the same as perceiving it as sense-data. Instead under normal conditions we perceive it as an object independent from us, in fact we would simply say, “I see a table.” Under the descriptivist view this would be reducible to the actual sense-data that I directly experience. But what is then meant by “reducible”? I have already suggested that this can not mean that the sentence is transformed into one that is simply about sense-data. Instead the sense-data serves to fix the reference of my claim that I see a table. Mackie rightly points out that this carries no “phenomenalist implications” for the indirect realist. It is in virtue of the fact that I have certain mind-dependent experiences of the table that I am able to refer to the “real” table.

The problem of justification still remains, and its solution is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would quickly add that I find it entirely unconvincing, and that the second premiss of the phenomenalist argument is plainly false. Yet I will leave this argument for another time. For our purposes it is enough that the description theory can provide a solution to the problem of reference. Indirect realism and the theory of descriptions provide mutual support for the truth of each theory independently. It was clear from the outset that the description theory required an indirect realist account, but as we now see indirect realism likewise requires a Descriptivist view.
ENDNOTES

1. While W.V. Quine does not belong in this group, it should be noted that one of the two fundamental challenges to descriptive theory can be found in his writings. I am referring to the modal argument that he levels in *The Problem of Interpreting Modal Logic* (for an exact reference see note number 13) and the challenge it presents to an adequate theory of descriptions.

2. For the purpose of this paper, I will not delve into the topic of ambiguous descriptions of the form “a so-and-so.” Rather I shall only be concerned with definite descriptions, or those which contain the property of applying uniquely or not at all.


5. Russell (1912), 59.

6. Ibid., 55.


12. It might be the case that I can no longer remember where I first picked up the name. This would not necessarily affect my ability to denote, nor would it significantly alter
the meaning of the name. It *might* be the case that I now am relying on my past uses of the name to denote successfully. But the only consequential effect that this might have on my use of the name would come from the epistemic fallout of any claims to knowledge I made concerning the person denoted by that given name.

13. W.V. Quine, “The Problem of Interpreting Modal Logic.” *The Journal of Symbolic Logic*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 1947), 47-48. Quine’s use of C is equivalent to saying “is congruent with.” This is seldom used by present logicians, in fact Kripke simply substitutes identity for congruence in the argument. In evaluating this argument I have done the same. I have also normalized the modal operators.


15. Perhaps I should say which reading ought to take precedence in this criticism. Notice that it is only if one gives a purely *de re* reading of the operators that any problem occurs. Hintikka has expressed his belief that none of the modal systems represents the “correct” view. Instead each system or reading of the operators sheds light on a different aspect of necessity or possibility.


18. Ibid., 190.


21. Ibid., 89.


24. Ibid., 57.

25. Ibid., 59.


28. Mackie (1976), 51


30. Ibid., 33.


32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 53.
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